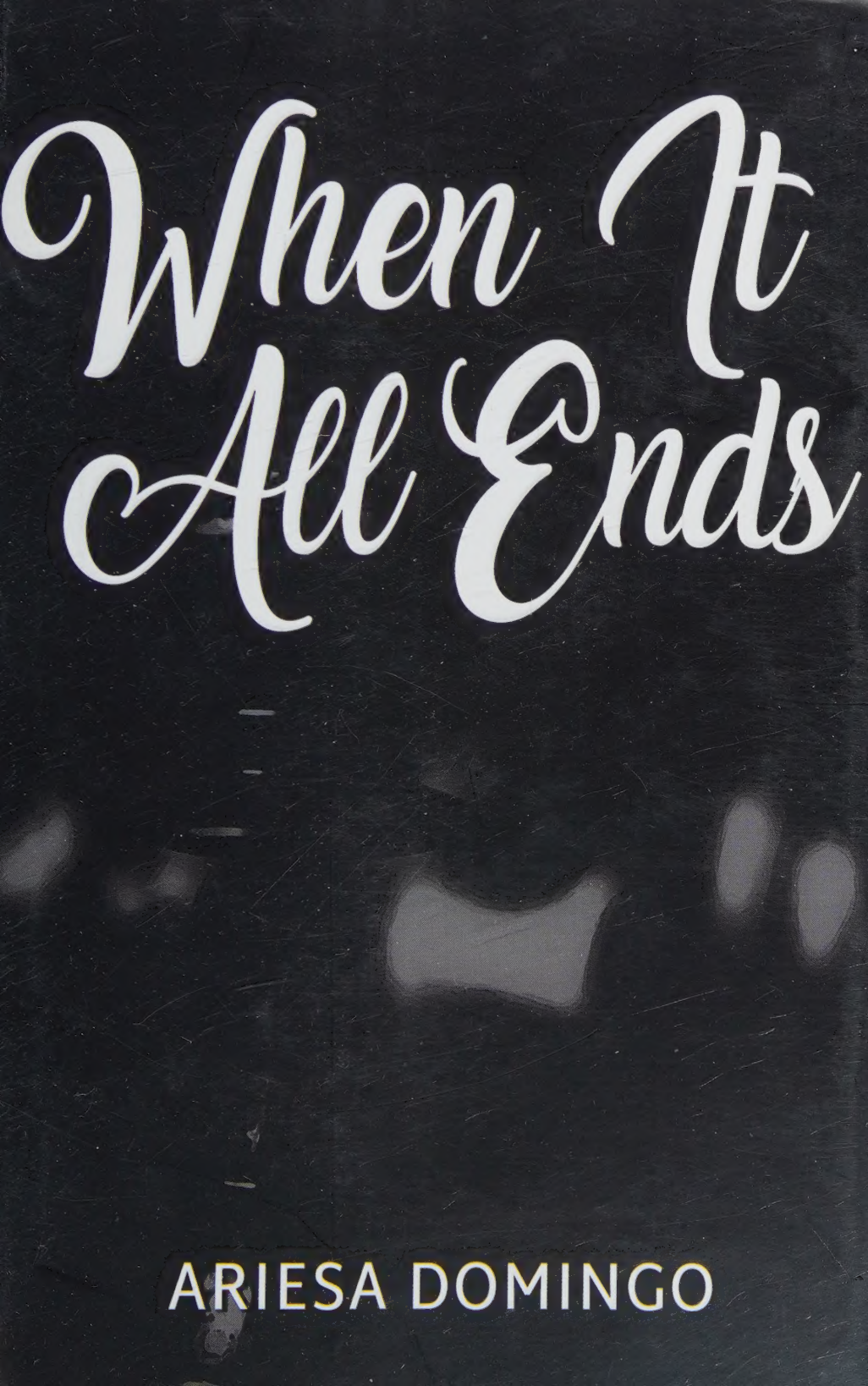
When It All Ends
ARIESA DOMINGO

ALL Belinda Ophelia Estrella wanted
was a simple life — opposite to the world
she was raised in.
Bata pa lang siya, namulat na siya
sa kaguluhan sa paligid niya.
Her kind of normal were killings & bloodshed.
Pero kahit na ganoon, umaasa siya
na hindi niya kailangang maging
katulad ng mga tao sa paligid niya.

She thought her faith in humanity was
enough to change the norm.
But when events forced her
to fit in to the cruel world she belonged in,
she would learn that in life,
it is better to be hated so long as you're feared.
Dahil sa mundong ginagalawan niya,
buhay ang katumbas ng kapangyarihan.
At kamatayan ang katumbas ng pagtitiwala.

But how long would she be able to last?
How long would she be able to endure
with all the deceit surrounding her?

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When It All Ends

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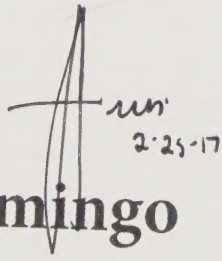

2-25-17

Ariesa Jane Domingo

When It All Ends

ARIESA JANE DOMINGO

EYD
EES

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A Latte Like Love

That Uptight Man

Let them *hate,* so long as they *fear.*

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Vita et obitus Hathumodae primae abbatissae Gandersheimensis

Te iam portus habet; nos adhuc iactat abyssus.
Te lux vera tenet; nos Tenebrae retinent.
Te cum virginibus comitans, quocumque it, agnum, lilia cum violis colligis atque rosis;
nos cum concillis nostris tumulo ecce tuopte
flores spargentes, ducimus excubias.

- by Aguis

When It All Ends

Extrait

"It's been months, Avo! Ilang buwan na 'yung lumipas! Don't you come here and say that you want me back!" I shouted at his face. My chest was heavy with anger. I thought I was numb, but here I was, feeling all the pain brought by him.

I trusted him. Despite all people telling me that he's dangerous, I still put my trust in him. Kasi sabi niya mahal niya ako... kasi sabi niya, ipagtatanggol niya ako.

Kasi sabi niya, mas mahalaga pa raw ako sa buhay niya. And being a fool, I believed him. I believed the liar and I got fooled. Maybe I deserved this. But it still hurt... It hurt being betrayed by the one whom you entrusted your life with.

"You don't want me. You want sex," I told him. Or maybe he wanted the power... or the satisfaction of seeing me being fooled by him.

He stared at me with those lonely pair of eyes.

"I don't need sex. Life fucks me everyday."

"Maybe that's good. It's the payment for making a fool out of me."

A saw pain shot through his eyes... but maybe it wasn't. Kasi bakit naman siya masasaktan?

"I didn't—fuck. Why don't you ever listen to me?"

"Because I fucking listened to you before! And look where it got me! You destroyed me! You fucking changed me!"

I wanted to cry. I wanted to turn back time. I wanted to stop myself from loving him, because all it did was to destroy every good fiber inside my body... until nothing good was left.

He took my humanity from me.

"I'm sorry," he said.

I looked at him, betrayed. He was the one who introduced me to pain. He's the one who acquianted me to anger. He was the one who made me cling on to revenge.

And sorry's all that he got?

"I don't need your sorry," I replied as I stared into his eyes—those eyes I once trusted. Those eyes who lied. "Your sorry won't take away the pain you gave me."

I pointed the gun at his head. It was so easy to end this now... To make all the pain and hurting go away. But was he worth it? Was he still worth all the pain and suffering?

"You told me you'd protect me... but you were the one who made me pull the trigger."

Academia
De · Mondragon

Chapitre Un

I did not ask for this kind of life. I never wanted this. If I could escape this, I would. And I tried... I tried to escape this nightmare I call life but every time I do, I always ended up back to where I started.

This nightmare was a maze. And I was afraid that there's no way out. Na habambuhay na lamang akong nakakulong dito.

"Miss Belinda, we have already arrived."

Tahimik ako na bumaba mula sa sasakyan na naghatid sa akin sa bahay. It was bullet-proof. As if anyone would dare to go against my parents. Baliw lang ang magtatangka.

Mag-isa lang ako na bumalik dito sa Pilipinas. Nasa Japan pa kasi ang mga magulang ko at may inaayos. I tried to persuade my father to at least come with me but he wouldn't even answer my calls—tanging secretary lang ang palagi kong nakaka-usap. It's okay, though. I understood why they had to stay there—it's about work. And I never questioned them when it came to work. I knew it's more important than me... than everything.

Hadn't I learned it the hard way?

Hindi naman ako tanga kung hindi ko pa rin maiintindihan iyon pagkatapos ng lahat ng nangyari.

Ipinasok na ng mga tauhan ni 'Dy ang mga gamit ko sa loob. I looked at the mansion in front of me. Not bad. Pumasok ako sa loob at mukhang bago lahat ng mga gamit. Mukhang naipalipat
na rin nila 'My 'yung mga pictures at painting namin.

"Where's my room?" I asked the maid who's nearest from where I was standing. Pagod ako mula sa byahe at gusto kong matulog muna. Bukas na rin kasi ang simula ng klase kaya gusto kong makabawi ng pahinga para naman may enerhiya ako para bukas.

Iginiya ako ng maid papunta sa magiging kwarto ko. Malaki iyon—kasing laki nung kwarto ko sa mansion namin sa Japan. Halos wala ngang pinagkaiba. Napangiti naman ako dahil nakikita ko talaga ang effort nila 'Dy na maging kumportable ako rito sa Pilipinas.

Was it weird that I am a Filipino yet I am foreign in my own land? Being here felt alien. I knew I should feel at home but it was the total opposite of what I was actually feeling.

I was feeling... alienated.

Na parang iniwan ako dito.

Bata pa lang ako nung lumipat kaming buong pamilya sa Japan. Ang sabi lang sa akin ni 'My, dahil daw sa family business kaya kami lumipat sa Japan pero alam ko naman na hindi lang iyon ang dahilan. Pagkatapos 'nun, hindi na ako nagtanong pa. Ayoko na rin kasing makiusisa sa mga bagay na tungkol sa family business. Pero kahit na sa Japan ako tumira buong buhay ko, sanay na sanay pa rin akong mag Tagalog. Palagi kasing sinasabi nila na isang araw, babalik kami sa Pilipinas. And this was the dreaded day.

Ipinagdala ako ng katulong ng pagkain sa kwarto.

"Thanks," I muttered.

Kinain ko lang iyon at saka kinuha ko 'yung laptop ko. I immediately typed the name of my school in the search bar. I was just excited about my new school. I wanted to have an idea para naman hindi ako magmukhang tanga bukas. I really wanted to make it work this time...

Gusto kong patunayan sa mga magulang ko na kaya kong

makihalubilo sa mga tao. Na hindi lang ako pang homeschool kagaya ng gusto nilang gawin ko buong buhay ko.

Academia de Mondragon. Matapos kong ilagay iyon ay nagtaka ako kung bakit ni isang result man lang ay walang lumabas. Nililoko ba ako nitong *Google*?

Kinuha ko 'yung entrance slip na ibinigay sa akin ni 'My bago pa man ako sumakay sa private plane namin. Tama naman ang spelling na inilagay ko pero bakit wala talagang resulta na lumalabas? Totoo ba 'tong school na papasukan ko?

Balak ko sanang tawagan si 'My pero naisip ko na busy sila sa business nila kaya naman kinuntento ko na lang ang sarili ko. At baka secretary na naman ang maka-usap ko. I was always trying to control my temper dahil ayaw nila 'My na nagagalit ako. So instead of risking, nanahimik na lang ako. Bahala na. Malalaman ko naman bukas kung ano ba talaga ang meron sa eskwelahan na 'yun.

And I was dead sure that my parents wouldn't bring me to a school that would be of a potential harm to me. After all, I was all they got.

The next day, I woke up early as usual. Hindi ko mapigilan pero medyo excited na rin ako. First time ko kasing papasok sa school. Buong buhay ko kasi ay home-schooled ako. Nung una e masaya pero habang tumatagal, nagiging boring. 'Yung mga teachers ko at ako lang kasi ang laging nagkikita. Ilang beses ko na sinabi kila 'My na papasukin ako sa normal na eskwelahan pero palagi nilang sinasabi na bawal. Kaya naman tumigil na ako kakasabi.

If there is one thing I learned about being a member of the *Estrella* family, it is that if they say no, they mean no.

And words are law. Kapag sinabing gagawin, sinisigurado nila na gagawin nila. That's why my parents were feared. Wala silang sinasanto. And sometimes, I wondered if they have a heart... because so far, they showed no indication of possessing one.

"Miss Belinda, your breakfast is ready," sabi nung katulong pagkatapos niyang kumatok. Agad naman akong tumayo sa kama ko at

bumaba. Hindi ko nga alam kung bakit pa ako bumaba. Wala naman akong kasabay kumain dahil wala pa sila 'My. Pero mas malungkot namang kumain sa kwarto mag-isa.

And as if I really had a decent meal for so long.

Sanay akong mag-isa. I was raised to be alone. To live alone. To survive alone.

I shouldn't have friends.

I shouldn't trust anyone.

I should have everyone fear me.

Ilang beses sinasabi sa akin. Ilang beses kong narinig hanggang sa maniwala na ako na ito ang dapat na paraan kung paano ako mamuhay.

To be feared.

Because they kept on telling me to let them hate, so long as they fear.

Ilang minuto lang ay tapos na akong kumain. Pumanhik na ako sa kwarto ko at naligo. Matagal akong naligo dahil maaga pa naman. Pinatuyo ko na rin ang buhok ko at saka naglagay ng makeup sa mukha. Matapos iyon ay tinignan ko 'yung uniform na isusuot ko. Nasa College na ako pero ngayon pa lang ako makakapagsuot ng uniform. Kakaiba talaga ang buhay na meron ako. Pakiramdam ko wala akong muwang sa mundo.

Kulay navy blue na plaid skirt, tucked in na white polo, mainipis na necktie, at pin na logo ng school ang bumubuo sa uniform ko. Tinignan ko ang sarili ko sa salamin bago ako nakuntento.

Pagkababa ko pa lang ay naka-abang na sa akin ang kotse na gagamitin ko. Kumunot ang noo ko dahil limousine pa ang gagamitin ko. I never understood such fascination with this vehicle. It seemed ordinary to me. And too flashy.

I just needed a car. I just needed something to drive me to my new school. I didn't want all eyes on me. Because for once, I wanted to feel normal.

"Ibang kotse ang gagamitin ko," sabi ko sa driver. Napakamot siya sa ulo. Hindi ako gumalaw sa kinatatayuan ko at tinignan ko lang siya.

Natakot siya sa akin kaya naman ibinalik niya ang limousine sa garahe.

Ganito yata talaga kapag *Estrella* ka—hindi ka pa nagsasalita, kinatatakutan ka na. Maybe it runs in the blood, after all.

Itim na SUV ang sinakyan ko patungo sa school. Napailing pa rin ako nung makita ko na bullet at shock proof itong sasakyan. Kailan ba ako masasanay?

Pagdating ko sa school, napanganga ako. Hindi naman ako tanga o ano, alam ko naman ang itsura ng school. Nanonood ako ng TV at nagbabasa ako ng mga libro. But this? This was beyond me.

Naputol ang paghanga ko sa school nung tawagin ng driver ang pangalan ko. "Miss Ophelia," tawag niya. Napatingin ako. "Nasa iyo na po daw ba 'yung ID niyo? Kailangan daw po kasi bago tayo papasukin."

Kumunot ang ulo ko pero kinuha ko pa rin 'yung ID sa loob ng bag ko. Kasama na kasi ito sa school package na ibinigay sa akin ni 'My. May laman iyon na entrance slip, isang iPad mini, at ID. Matapos ibigay iyon ay pinapasok na kami sa loob. Grabe naman ang security sa lugar na 'to. Eskwelahan lang naman.

Pagbukas ng higanteng gate ay mas nalaglag ang panga ko.

'What the fuck?!'

Halos hindi ako makapaniwala sa nakikita ko! Nasa eskwelahan pa ba talaga ako?! Pakiramdam ko ay may isang bagong community sa likod ng mataas na gate! May mga buildings dito—madami sila pero hindi gaanong matataas, siguro mga hanggang fifth floor lang sila. Mas mataas pa rin ang gate.

Inilibot ko ang tingin ko at bigla akong nanliit sa sarili ko nung makita ko na panay limousine ang sasakyan na nandito. *Damn,* inis na sabi ko sa sarili ko. Kung alam ko lang ay sana hindi na ako sumakay sa SUV na 'to! Mukha tuloy akong pulubi!

Bago kami makapasok sa mismong eskwelahan ay mayroon pang isang gate. Hindi na pinapapasok ang mga sasakyan doon kaya naman bumaba na ako.

"Please scan your ID for verification," sabi nung machine kaya

naman ginawa ko iyon. Automatic na bumukas ang gate at pumasok na ako. Maraming tao sa paligid. Maraming mga estudyante. Nag-uusap ang karamihan sa kanila at mukhang mga magkakakilala na sila.

Sanay naman ako na mag-isa ako buong paglaki ko pero ngayon, bigla akong nalungkot.

Patingin-tingin pa ako sa mga tao sa paligid ko nung biglang tumunog ang bell. Isa-isang naglakaran ang mga tao papunta sa iisang lugar kaya naman sumunod na rin ako roon. Habang naglalakad, kinuha ko 'yung iPad mula sa bag ko. Nandito kasi 'yung schedule ko.

7:00 am- General Assembly @ University Auditorium

Pumasok na rin ako sa loob at naupo sa bakanteng pwesto. Wala pa naman kasi akong kakilala. Halos lahat naman kasi rito ay may kaibigan na. Pakiramdam ko talaga isa akong alien.

"Good morning students," biglang may nagsalita sa harap. Napadiretso ako ng upo nung magsimula na ang assembly. "Some of you may already know me but I would still introduce myself. I am Madame Jovelyn Mondragon and I am your school headmistress."

Ang ibang mga estudyante ay hindi nakikinig. Para bang narinig na nila ito at bagot na bagot na sila.

"Excuse me," sabi ko sa katabi ko. Kanina ko pa tinitimbang kung kakausapin ko ba siya. Hindi kasi ako sanay na bigla na lang kumakausap ng tao pero curious na curious na talaga ako. Besides, schoolmate ko naman siya kaya hindi naman siguro ako papagalitan nila 'My.

Tumingin siya sa akin at saka ngumiti. "Hello," sabi niya.

"Hi," tipid kong sabi. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure."

"What's happening?" I asked. Mukhang na-weirduhan siya sa tanong ko dahil kitang-kita ko ang pagkunot ng noo niya. "I mean, what school is this? I tried searching this in the net pero wala akong nakita."

Mas lalong kumunot ang noo niya. "Don't you have any idea where you are?"

Umiling ako. What the heck was happening?

"You're in *Academia de Mondragon*," she said.

"Alam ko."

"You don't know what kind of school this is, am I right?" tanong niya ulit.

"This is a university—a *normal* university," I added. Kahit na kinakabahan ako, ayoko pa ring maniwala. I thought that this was my shot at a normal life.

Binigyan niya ako ng nakakalokong ngiti. "This is *not* your normal university."

Bigla na namang nangilabot ang dibdib ko. This kind of life would never leave me.

Matapos ang napakahabang pagsasalita ay isa-isa ng umalis ang mga estudyante. Kinuha ko ang cellphone ko at akma ko sanang tatawagan ang mga magulang ko para klaruhin ang mga nangyayari. Naguguluhan kasi ako. Akala ko okay na... Akala ko magiging normal na...

"You're just wasting your time," sabi niya. "Walang signal dito."

Kumunot ang noo ko pero nung tinignan ko ang screen ng phone ko ay tama nga siya—walang signal.

"Bakit walang signal?" I asked. Nagsisimula na akong mainis. Nasaang lugar ba kasi ako?!

Marahang tinapik niya ang balikat ko. "Chill ka lang, girl." How can I chill?! Hindi ko alam kung nasaang lugar ako at kung bakit ako nandito! I came here in the Philippines with the hope of finally living a normal life! Tapos ano? Parang balik lang ulit ako sa dati?

"Ano ba ang meron dito? Bakit ganito?!"

Huminga nang malalim iyong babae sa harap ko. "Before I start answering your questions, I would like to introduce myself first." Ini-offer niya ang kamay niya sa akin. "I am Cathy Uehara, *deuxième*."

Kumunot ang noo ko.

"Deu-what?"

Napangiti na naman siya sa kainosentehan ko. Ang dami-dami kong gustong malaman tungkol sa eskwelahan na ito!

"This school is a school for the sons and daughters of the most dangerous and richest people in the whole of Asia," sabi niya sa akin. "The reason why you could not search this school is because this is a secret place. Ang tanging nakakaalam lang nito ay ang mga nag-aaral dito."

Para akong nabuhusan ng malamig na tubig dahil sa mga narinig ko.

"Mayroong hierarchy system sa loob ng eskwelahan na ito," pagpapatuloy niya pero halos wala na akong maintindihan. Ang tanging alam ko lang ay gusto kong lumabas mula rito at tanungin ang mga magulang ko kung bakit. Bakit nila ako pinadala rito? Bakit pinipilit nila na tanggapin ko ang buhay na alam na alam nilang pilit kong tinatakasan?

"Ang pinakamababa ay ang *Quatrième.* Sila 'yung mga tauhan ng mga pamilya rito na pinagkatiwalaan na nila. Parang scholars, ganon. Hindi sila mayaman pero magagaling sila. Pero sila 'yung mga pinaglalaruan ng mga *Dieux.* Ang sumunod naman ay ang mga *Troisième* o mga anak ng ammunition suppliers. Sakto lang sila. Hindi masyadong kinakawawa, hindi rin iginagalang. 'Yung mga kagaya ko naman na anak ng gun makers ay tinatawag na *Deuxième.* Medyo may kapangyarihan kami sa school na 'to pero medyo lang. May mga kinakatakutan kasi talaga rito."

Hindi pa rin ako makasagot.

"Sino?" I managed to find my voice.

Ngumiti siya ng tipid sa akin. May itinuro siya sa bandang likuran ko. Isa itong grupo ng mga tao. Ayon sa pagkakabilang ko ay lima sila—apat na lalaki at isang babae.

"Sila ang *Dieux.* Sila ang batas. Sila ang tagapagmana ng Mafia organizations."

Tinitignan ko sila nung aksidenteng mapalingon ang isa sa kanila.

Nagtama sandali ang mga mata namin. Para akong nakaramdam ng kuryente nung sandaling iyon.

"S-sino siya?" sabi ko sabay turo 'dun sa lalaki na tumingin sa akin.

"He's Augustus Voltaire Ostenhaimer. And he's the deadliest man in this university."

Hindi ko napigilan na mapatawa.

"Are you serious?"

She laughed at me. "Bakit? Wala ka bang pinsan o kapatid na nag-aral dito?" she asked, weirded out by my reaction.

I shook my head. I didn't want to divulge any information from myself.

And most certainly, I didn't want to talk about my family.

"Kaya siguro," she replied. "Anyway, if you have any relatives na dito nag-aral, sigurado naman ako na makakarating sa iyo ang balita tungkol sa mga *Dieux*."

"Ano'ng klaseng balita?" I dared ask. Mabuti na lamang at hindi na ulit saakin naka-tingin iyong lalaking sinasabi ni Cathy na Augustus daw ang pangalan. I didn't know him and yet, even his stares were enought to send my system into an overdrive.

If only I didn't know how to control my feelings, I didn't know what would have happened to me. Hell, I didn't even know what was happening. Dahil ba hindi ako sanay sa maraming tao kaya kahit tingin pa lang nung lalaking iyon, naapektuhan na agad ako?

"You know... kung paano mangtrip ang mga *Dieux*."

Mas lalo lang kumunot ang noo ko. "How?"

Cathy shrugged. "Sometimes, people from here will just magically disappear."

"Ha?"

"Kapag kasi ginalit mo ang *Dieux* o kahit na mapagtripan lang nila, lalo na kapag napunta ka sa maling side, you'll die."

Nanlaki ang mga mata ko. "Hindi ba safe dito? Akala ko safe dito!"

"Yeah, it's safe... as long as you won't bother the *Dieux*."

"But—" I said, trying to find the right words to say. "Don't their families look for them kapag may mga nawawala?"

Cathy nodded. "Of course, they'd look. But they knew better than to go against the most powerful families in our world."

Kaya ganoon na lang? Papabayaan na lamang nila ang mga *Dieux* na iyon na gawin kung ano ang gusto nila dahil lang kaya nila?

Sometimes, I really couldn't help but hate everything in this world I was living in. It was ridiculous. Walang awa sa mga walang kapangyarihan. As if one's life was measured by the power one was carrying.

Nakakadiri.

"Kaya kung ako sa 'yo, just stay under the radar and you'll be safe."

"And what if I don't want to?"

Cathy smiled. "Prepare for the worst."

Iniwanan niya ako dahil may pupuntahan pa siya. I stayed there, looking at the group of people she pointed at me. Those people who probably thought they're gods controlling everything around them. People who lived with power. People who would do anything for power.

Power. People get so drunk from it that they wanted more.

Makalipas ang ilang minuto, tumayo na ako para umalis. Habang naglalakad ako, napansin ko na mayroong mga matang naka-tingin sa akin. I could feel the hairs on my nape on their edge. Unti-unti akong lumingon...

And there he was.

The *deadliest* man in the school was looking at me.

Chapitre Deux

Apparently, in this school, different ranks get different kinds of treatment. Kakatapos lang namin sa assembly at mamaya pang hapon ang start ng mga klase. Iniwan muna ako ni Cathy at sabi niya na may pupuntahan siya. Kanina niya pa ako tinatanong kung ano ang rank ko pero ayaw kong sumagot. Kinuha ko muna 'yung iPad mula sa bag ko at tinignan sa mapa kung nasaan ang Head Mistress's office. Mabuti na lang at may naka-install na na mapa kung hindi, babasagin ko talaga 'to! Wala namang silbi sa akin ang iPad na 'to dahil wala rin namang internet sa lugar na 'to. Pakiramdam ko talaga ay nasa bundok ako.

Palakad-lakad lang ako at hinahanap kung nasaan 'yung Mondragon building. Puro sa apelido kasi nakapangalan ang mga building kaya duda ko ay donation ito nung mga tinatawag niya na *Dieux*.

Agad akong nakapasok sa building dahil automatic na nadedetect 'yung ID sa loob ng bag ko. Kung hindi lang talaga ako naiinis sa mga magulang ko, mamamangha talaga ako sa lugar na 'to.

"Good morning, Miss Estrella," pagbati sa akin nung babae sa front desk. Hindi ko alam kung paano niya nalaman ang apelido ko pero wala na akong pakielam sa ngayon. Ang gusto ko lang ay ang makausap ang headmistress.

"I want to talk to the headmistress," sabi ko sa kanya. Agad-agad siyang nagdial sa telepono niya at walang anu-ano ay pinagbuksan niya ako ng pinto. "After you, Miss."

Hindi ko na pinansin kung bakit ba mukhang takot siya sa akin gayong wala naman akong ginagawa sa kanya. Basta pumasok na ako sa loob. Nakaupo doon ang headmistress at nakangiti siya sa akin.

"It's nice to finally meet the successor of the Mafia Estrella."

My jaw tightened.

"I want to go home," matigas kong sabi. I just wanted a normal life! Gaano ba kahirap ibigay iyon?! "Call my driver. Walang signal dito sa lugar na 'to!" I hissed.

Huminga lang siya nang malalim. Kalmado pa rin ang buong mukha niya. Parang wala lang sa kanya na galit na ako.

"Take a seat first, Miss Estrella," sabi niya sa akin. Hindi ko alam pero bigla akong napaupo. Parang kahit gaano ka-kalmado ang sinasabi niya, mayroon pa ring bakas ng awtoridad. "Don't you like this school?" tanong niya sa akin.

Hindi agad ako nakasagot. It's not that I did not like this school... It's just that I did not want this kind of life.

"You are sent here for a reason, Miss Estrella. Kung iniisip mo na ipinatapon ka rito ng mga magulang mo, nagkakamali ka. You are the daughter of one of the most powerful Mafia organizations in Asia and that makes your life in constant state of danger."

Tiim-bagang lang ako na nakikinig sa mga sinasabi niya. "I don't want this kind of life."

"No one asked for this kind of life, Miss Estrella. No one wants to be surrounded and followed by death."

Kumirot ang puso ko dahil bigla kong naalala 'yung nangyari 14 years ago kung bakit kinailangan naming pumunta sa Japan. It was the moment that made me sleepless at nights... That made my dreams turn into nightmares...

"Kung hindi mo alam, ngayon ang pinaka-delikado na oras para sa

mga organisasyon ng mga Mafia sa buong Asya. Hangga't maaari, gusto ng mga magulang mo na sa kanila ka tumira pero maging sila ay alam na mas magiging ligtas ka rito," sabi niya sa akin na naging dahilan ng pag-angat ng mukha ko.

"Ano'ng ibig mong sabihin? Dito ako titira?"

Tumango siya sa akin. "You're a lot safer here."

"No!" sigaw ko. "I want to go home!"

"No one gets out of here without my permission," she said. "And don't raise your voice when you are talking to me."

Nakaramdam ako ng takot sa kanya. Hindi ko alam pero mayroong kakaiba sa kanya na kahit hindi siya sumigaw, makakaramdam ako ng takot at kaba.

Mayroon siyang inilabas na iPad mula sa drawer niya. May mga pinindot siya roon. Inilahad niya ang kamay niya at kinuha ang hintuturo ko. Ipinatong niya iyon sa iPad at automatic ito na nagscan.

"You're now in the system," nakangiting sabi niya. "We have a special dorm for the *Dieux*. You may choose whatever room you want. Para naman sa mga damit mo, mayroong mga boutique sa paligid ng school. Gamitin mo lang ang ID mo bilang pambayad at ma-chacharge na iyon sa mga magulang mo."

Hindi ko na maintindihan ang mga sinasabi niya sa sobrang dami. Pero isa lang ang gusto kong klaruhin. Hindi ako titira sa dormitoryo kasama iyong mga *Dieux* na 'yun!

"I'll stay here," sabi ko sa kanya na naging dahilan naman ng pagsilay ng isang maliit na ngiti sa labi niya. "But I have a condition."

"I'm listening," saad niya.

Huminga ako nang malalim. I know that this decision would affect my entire stay in this horrid place but I just needed this for my sanity.

"I won't live in that dorm. I want to choose my own room and I want a roommate."

She smiled at me. "Consider that done."

"And I don't want people to know that I am a *Dieux*. I will be a

Deuxième."

Agad akong lumabas mula sa opisina niya. Mabuti na lang at hindi na siya nagreklamo pa sa mga hinihiling ko. Naglakad ako paikot sa buong campus. Limang oras pa naman bago magsimula ang mga klase kaya may oras pa ako para hanapin si Cathy.

Hindi ako kumportable sa mga tao rito. Iniisip ko pa lang na kagaya ko sila... ayoko na silang maging kakilala. It was enough that I hated who I am. I didn't need to surround myself with people whom I loathe.

"Cathy!" agad na tawag ko sa kanya. Nakita ko siya na nakaupo sa isa sa mga benches.

"Bakit?"

"Saang dorm ka nakatira?" I asked her.

Kahit na mukhang naguguluhan siya sa akin, sinagot niya pa rin ako. "Hindi ko pa alam, e."

Bago pa man ako tuluyang kainin ng hiya, inaya ko na siya na maging roommate ko. Mabuti naman at pumayag siya.

"So *Deuxième* ka rin? Nice!" sabi niya sabay ngiti ng malaki. Hindi naman ako nagsisinungaling. Ayoko lang na tratuhin nila ako ng kaiba dahil lang sa kinabibilangan ko na pamilya.

Agad kaming pumunta ni Cathy at naglibot sa mga dorm. Maraming dorm dito, iba-iba ang itsura. Mas maganda, mas mahal. Pero hindi ko maikakaila na pinakamaganda pa rin ang dorm ng mga *Dieux*.

"Dito na lang kaya tayo? Mukhang maganda naman at saka konting lakad lang mula sa school," sabi niya. "Teka nga, bago tayo magsalo sa isang kwarto, magpakilala ka nga muna sa akin!"

"I'm Bel—" sabi ko sana bago ko putulin ang sarili ko. If she'd hear my whole name, no doubt that she'll know about my identity. "I'm Boe," I said. Hindi naman ako nagsisinungaling. I am Belinda Ophelia Estrella.

Umiling siya sa akin. "Hindi ganyan magpakilala rito, girl!"

"Bakit ba parang ang dami mong alam? Taga rito ka ba?"

Tumango siya sa akin. "Elementary pa lang, nandito na ako. Dito graduate lahat ng kapatid ko. Well, anyway, ang tamang pagpapakilala

rito ay complete name mo at saka rank mo. Dito kasi idedepende kung paano ka ita-trato."

Napailing na lang ako. Hindi ba pwedeng itrato kaming lahat na mga tao? Bakit ba basehan pa kung saang pamilya kami nanggaling?

"Fine," I breathed. "I'm Boe Estrella, *Deuxième*." Mabuti na lang at hindi na siya nagduda pa sa apelido ko. Ang alam ko kasi, may nadaanan kami na Estrella building kanina. Hindi ko alam na dati pa pala, nagdodonate na ang pamilya ko rito...

After nun, nakapagdesisyon na kami na doon kami sa Southeast Dorm. Nasa sentro kasi 'yung dorm ng mga *Dieux* at nakabase ang pangalan ng ibang mga dorm kung ano ang posisyon nila mula sa dorm ng mga *Dieux*. Kitang-kita mo talaga ang kapangayarihan, e. Sa kanila nakasentro ang lahat dito.

Nagbayad na kami gamit ang mga ID namin. Hindi ko maintindihan dahil hindi peso ang currency dito. Mga bomba lang 'yung mga figures.

"Ano ang ibig sabihin nung mga baril?" I asked her nung nasa elevator kami. Nasa fifth floor 'yung dorm room namin at titignan na kasi namin.

"May tatlong pera rito. 'Yung mga knives, one thousand peso ang katumbas bawat isa. 'Yung guns naman, five thousand. At 'yung mga bombs naman, ten thousand."

"So ibig sabihin, dahil sampung bombs 'yung nakalagay, ibig sabihin one hundred thousand 'yung bayad sa dorm room kada buwan?!" Hindi makapaniwala kong sabi!

Natawa naman sa akin si Cathy. "Para kang hindi mayaman kung umarte! C'mon, barya lang naman sa parents natin 'yan," sabi niya at saka itinapat niya iyong index finger niya sa scanner. Automatic na bumukas ang pinto at sinalubong kami ng magandang kwarto.

Mayroong dalawang queen-sized bed. Mayroon ring mga pinto. Isa-isa kong binuksan ang mga iyon at nakita ko na mayroon kaming tig-isang walk-in closet at CR. Mukhang sulit naman pala ang bayad dito.

"Ano 'to? Bakit ayaw mabuksan?"

Nakahiga siya sa kama niya. "Ah. 'Yan 'yung panic room. May ganyan bawat sulok ng school. Hindi mo talaga mabubuksan 'yan dahil bubukas lang 'yan kapag nasa state of emergency na 'yung buong lugar na 'to."

Kumunot ang noo ko. Akala ko ba safe ang lugar na 'to?

"Nasugod na ba 'tong school?" tanong ko sa kanya.

Umiling siya. "Sa loob ng one hundred years ng school na 'to, hindi pa naman. Pero in case lang naman 'yan. Ang laki ng binabayad sa kanila kaya dapat lang na umayos sila. Kasi sigurado ako na kapag may nangyaring hindi maganda sa atin, lalo na sa mga Dieux, uubusin nila ang pamilya ng mga Mondragon, 'yung may-ari ng school na 'to."

Sinabi ni Cathy na matutulog daw muna siya dahil kakagaling niya lang sa France kahapon at may jetlag pa siya. Hindi kasi nagpapapasok sa school na 'to kapag bakasyon. Nagbubukas ito kapag pasukan at nagsasara kapag katapusan na ng school year.

Lumabas ako. May tatlong oras pa bago magsimula ang klase.

Pumunta ako sa mga shop sa labas ng eskwelahan. Tama nga ang headmistress, kumpleto na nga rito. May mga coffee shops, boutiques, cake shops, drug stores, grocery stores, at kung anu-ano pa.

Dumiretso ako papunta sa drug store dahil naisipan ko na bumili ng toiletries. Wala kasi akong dala na kahit na ano. Cellphone at ilang notebook lang ang dala ko na mukhang wala ring kwenta sa lugar na 'to.

Kumuha ako ng basket at saka nag-ikot ikot. Kinuha ko lahat ng mga sa tingin ko ay kailangan ko.

Papaliko na ako nung may marinig ako na boses ng mga lalaki.

"Dude, balak mo bang lumpuhin si Laurie?" sabi nung lalaki na maputi at may kulay blondie na buhok. "Tangina, isang box ng condoms!" sabi niya sabay tawa nang malakas.

Hindi siya pinansin nung lalaki.

Agad akong umatras dahil nakilala ko agad sila. Sobrang lakas ng dating nila. Tama nga yata si Cathy. Iba talaga ang mga *Dieux* na 'to.

Hindi pa sila nagsasalita, kakabàhan ka na sa takot. Tumatawa pa 'yung isa sa lagay na 'to pero grabe na 'yung kaba na nararamdaman ko.

Kung nandito si 'Dy, papagalitan ako nun. Palagi niyang sinasabi sa akin na isa akong Estrella kaya dapat wala akong kinatatakutan. Pero masisisi niya ba ako? Hindi ako pinanganak para sa buhay na ganito.

Paatras ako nang paatras nung may mabunggo ako. Agad akong lumingon pero halos mabitiwan ko na 'yung basket na hawak ko nung mapansin ko kung sino iyong nasa likod ko.

"Uy, Avo, dude!" tawag nung mga lalaki. "Halika rito, tignan mo si Night balak na naman lumpuhin 'yung syota niya!"

Sa sobrang lakas ng kabog ng dibdib ko, pakiramdam ko hihimatayin ako anumang segundo mula ngayon.

Chapitre Trois

ako pero nakatayo pa rin siya'sa harap ko. Dumating na tuloy 'yung kasama niya na tumatawa kanina. "Dude!" sabi niya. Napatingin siya sa akin at mukhang napansin niya na kinakabahan ako. "First day na first day, e..."

Nakayuko pa rin ako. Damn! Bakit ba kinakabahan ako sa kanya! Kung tutuusin, pareho lang naman kami!

"Tigilan mo na nga 'yang chicks. Baka gusto mong magwala na naman si Ella," sabi niya sabay halakhak. Tumingin siya sa akin at saka pinaalis na ako. Agad naman akong tumakbo matapos iyon.

Dumiresto na agad sako a dorm namin. Pakiramdam ko naubos na ang enerhiya ko para sa buong araw! Ano ba naman 'to!

Nakita ko si Cathy na natutulog pa rin. Bakit naman kasi hindi na lang din ako natulog? E 'di sana hindi ko pa nakasalubong iyong mga *Dieux* na 'yun! May jetlag din naman ako dahil galing ako sa Japan kahapon! Naku talaga!

Humiga ako sa kama matapos kong maibaba iyong mga gamit ko. Nakatitig lang ako sa kisame. Sinusubukan ko na matulog pero wala talaga. Para akong mababaliw sa lugar na 'to. Walang signal, walang internet. Para akong nasa bundok... na walang daan para makatakas. Sobrang taas ng bakod dito na ni hindi ko na pagbabalakan na akyatin pa. Mayroon ding camera sa bawat sulok.

Napatingin ako sa gilid ko nung magising si Cathy.

"Ano'ng oras na?" she said as she yawned.

"10," tipid na sagot ko. Kumalam na rin ang sikmura ko. Kanina pa ang huli kong kain. Hindi naman ako mabilis magutom pero pakiramdam ko gutom na gutom na ako. Naubos talaga ang energy ko sa engkwentro ko sa mga lalaki na iyon!

Umupo si Cathy sa kama niya at saka nag-inat. "Kain tayo?" she asked and I quickly obliged.

Sabay kaming naglakad palabas ng dorm. Maraming tao rito pero hindi rin masyado. Ewan ko. May kakaiba talaga sa eskwelahan na ito. Bawat makakasalubong ko, ramdam ko na hindi lang sila basta tao.

Makikita mo naman kasi iyon sa tindig at tingin pa lang nila. It's like they're exuding the sense of authority and power.

Pumunta kami sa isang restaurant pero agad akong nag-aya na sa iba na lang kami dahil nakita ko na naman iyong grupo nung mga lalaki. Pero hindi gaya ng kanina, may kasama silang dalawang babae.

"Hay nako, hindi na talaga nasanay ang mga babae na 'to," sabi ni Cathy habang naiiling pa.

"Ha?" I had to fake my expression. Ayoko naman kasi na mahalata niya na curious ako sa mga tinatawag nilang *Dieux*.

Doon kami kumain ni Cathy sa katapat na resto pero mula sa kinauupuan namin ay kita pa rin namin ang lamesa nila. Puno 'yung kinakainan nila. Maraming babae at halata naman na nagpapapansin sila. Masyado naman kasing obvious.

"Syempre nga mga *Dieux* ang mga 'yun kaya hinahabol ng mga babae rito 'yan. Kapag kasi nagpakasal ang mas mababa na rank sa mas mataas, aakyat sila ng rank. Isipin mo naman kung Quatrieme ka tapos biglang akyat sa *Dieux*! Ay ang taray mo 'dun!"

Dumating na iyong waitress at umorder na kami. Habang busy na mamili si Cathy ng kakainin namin ay hindi ko mapigilan na mapatingin sa gawi nila. May kakaiba talaga sa grupo na iyon... Para bang may itinatago silang sikreto.

"Sino ba ang tinitignan mo?" kunut-noo na tanong ni Cathy nung mahuli niya ako na nakatingin sa kabilang resto.

"Wala .." I said. "Nacucurious lang ako sa kanila." I lied.

Nagkibit balikat na lang siya. "Well, since wala ka naman talagang alam sa school na 'to, ako na ang magsasabi sa iyo na 'wag mong lapitan 'yung mga tao na 'yan. I mean, kung gusto mo ng normal na buhay dito sa loob ng school, layuan mo sila."

"Bakit naman?"

"Well, firstly, iyong lalaki na blonde ang buhok? His name is Fuji Irie. He's the ultimate playboy. Promise, kung virgin ka pa at iningatan mo

'yang puri mo, lumayo-layo ka na sa taong 'yan," sabi niya. Medyo natawa naman ako. "Seryoso ako!"

"Wala naman akong sinasabi..." I murmured.

Mabuti naman at wala pa 'yung order naman dahil may oras pa para magkwento sa akin si Cathy.

"Iyong tahimik na nakasalamin naman ay si Lorenzo del Rio. Actually, medyo okay naman siya. Tahimik lang talaga kaya hindi ko alam kung ano ang ugali. Ang kinakausap niya lang kasi ay 'yung mga *Dieux* din. Elitista lang ang peg niyan."

Natawa ako sa mga side comments ni Cathy. Hindi talaga ako nagkamali na siya ang maging kaibigan ko. Nakakatawa siya at ang dami niyang alam tungkol sa lugar na 'to.

"Iyon namang tahimik din pero may katabi na babae, iyon si Night." Oh! Siya 'yung bumibili ng maraming condoms kanina! Bigla akong namula sa naisip ko. Tinukso naman ako ni Cathy agad! "Crush mo?" she teased.

"Hindi, ah." I was quick to dodge the question.

Nginitian lang ako ni Cathy na nakakaloko. Bahala siya dyan na ipagpilitan na may crush ako doon sa Night.

"Anyway, ayun nga si Nightly Von Klampenberg. Tapos 'yung girlfriend niya is si Laurie Smith. Basta medyo magulo 'yung dalawa na 'yan kasi minsan break, minsan okay. Pero hindi *Dieux* si Laurie. Ka-rank natin siya. Swerte nga niya, nakaka-mingle siya sa kanila," sabi ni Cathy, bakas ang panghihinayang sa boses.

Pakiramdam ko, may crush 'to kay Night!

Pero bago pa man ako makapagsalita ay ipinakilala niya na 'yung pinaka-hinihintay ko.

"And last but not the least, ang royal couple ng Academia de Mondragon—si Augustus Voltaire Ostenhaimer and si Elliana Montrova. Simula middle school, silang dalawa na. Hindi ko alam kung paano naging sila dahil hindi ko naman makita ang affection kay Avo pero super clingy niyang si Ella. Basta, kapag may Avo, expect na may

Ella na kasunod."

Biglang dumating iyong mga order namin kaya naman parang nakalimutan na ni Cathy na may sinasabi siya. Ako naman, hindi ko pa rin maialis ang tingin sa sa kanila. Something about him was making me think so hard...

Agad akong nagbaba nung tingin nung mapadako sa gawi namin ang tingin niya. Damn! Muntik na naman ako 'dun, ah!

"Ay, mabubulunan lang, girl? Aba, dahan-dahan!" sabi ni Cathy at inabutan ako ng tubig. Bigla ko na lang kasing isinubo iyong pasta sa bibig ko dahil sa kaba.

Matapos kaming kumain ay nagdesisyon kami na mag-ikot muna. Si Cathy kasi ay may damit na palibhasa ay dito na talaga siya nag-aaral. Ako naman, sinamahan niya na magshopping. Bahala na sila 'My dito. Basta bibilhin ko lahat ng magustuhan ko. Desisyon nila na pinadala nila ako rito. Naiinis pa rin ako na ni hindi nila ako kinunsulta. Buhay ko pa rin naman ito... They could have at least asked me...

Ilang oras din kami na namimili ni Cathy. Ipinahatid na lang namin sa dorm 'yung mga napamili ko. Mabuti na lang at pati pajama ay kumpleto sila. May nakita rin ako na bookstore dito pero malapit na kasing mag time kaya mamaya ko na lang siguro dadaanan.

"Bye, girl!" sabi ni Cathy. BA Comparative Literature ang sa kanya at ako naman, BA Business Administration. Medyo normal pa rin naman pala kahit papaano ang school na 'to...

Itinuro na sa akin ni Cathy kung saan ang building ko at medyo napahinto ako nung makita ko ang pangalan ng building.

Ostenhaimer Building

Huminga ako nang malalim. *Kalma, Fee. Kalma.*

Hindi pa ako nakakapasok sa loob, ramdam ko na ang kakaibang awra. Parang ang bigat. Tinignan ko ang room number na naka-assign sa akin at mukhang nasa tamang lugar naman ako. Tumingin ako sa loob at wala pa naman ang professor.

Mabuti naman.

Pagpasok ko, pansin ko na'puno na lahat ng mga upuan. May isang bakante lang doon sa pagitan ni Night at Avo.

Agad naman akong umatras pero nakita ko na nasa likod ko na ang professor. "Are you in my class?" tanong niya sa akin at mabilis naman akong tumango. Pinapasok niya ako sa loob. Mukhang mabait ang mga professor sa mga estudyante. Baka takot din sila... Kahit ako naman ay natatakot sa mga tao rito. Ramdam ko kasi na delikado silang mga tao. Parang isang maling galaw mo lang, lagot ka na kaagad.

Lumibot ng tingin ang professor at nakita niya na ang tanging bakanteng upuan na lang ay iyong sa pagitan ni Avo at Night.

'Wag naman!

"Mr. Ostenhaimer and Mr. Klampenberg, could this lady sit between the two of you?" tanong niya. Nagtinginan naman lahat ng estudyante sa akin. Tama nga si Cathy. Kung gusto ko ng matahimik na buhay dito sa loob, 'wag na 'wag akong didikit sa mga *Dieux*... Pero huli na ata ang lahat dahil tumango na si Avo.

Pinaupo na ako doon ng professor. Bawat hakbang na ginagawa ko ay sobrang lakas ng kabog ng dibdib ko. Pagdating ko sa pwesto ko ay dahan-dahan akong naupo. Pakiramdam ko kasi ay kapag naabala ko sila, sasaktan nila ako.

Nagflash ng schedule sa harap si Professor Chua.

"Here's your schedule for the whole term. It's already in your iPad. Should you have any more question, you may approach me anytime," sabi niya. Tinignan ko iyong schedule na sinasabi niya. Akala ko normal na itong nangyayari... Hindi pa rin pala. Bukod sa mga Business Administration subject ay mayroong mga target shooting classes din kami. Mayroon pang mga iba na hindi ko maintindihan.

So this school was still far from normal...

Nagsimula na ang klase at ako naman, pilit ko na pinapakinggan ang lahat. Mas matatahimik kasi ako kung doon ako magcoconcentrate kaysa rito sa dalawang katabi ko.

Mabuti na lang at mabilis natapos agad ang klase. Agad akong

lumabas. Damn! Bakit kasi walang cellphone?! Paano ko kokontakin si Cathy ngayon?

Palakad-lakad lang ako sa campus at hinahanap ko si Cathy. Para akong tanga. Ang laki-laki ng lugar na 'to pero naghahanap pa rin ako.

Nung medyo mapagod na ako ay naupo ako sa isang bench. Bahala na nga. Dito na lang ako magpapalipas ng break time...

"Oh, my god, girl!" tili nung isang babae. Hindi ko naman ugali na makinig sa usapan ng may usapan pero ang lakas kasi nilang mag-usap talaga. Hindi ko naman pwedeng utusan 'yung tenga ko na mag-deactivate muna for a while!

"What?" sagot nung kasama niya.

"Damn! After five years, break na rin si Avo at Ella!" tili nung babae. Biglang nanlaki rin ang mata ko. What? Break na sila? Magkasama pa sila kanina, ah!

Kung kanina, pinipilit ko pa na hindi makinig, ngayon naman ay mataman na nakikinig na talaga ako sa mga sinasabi nila.

"Ano—" Natigilan ako sa sinasabi ko nung mapansin ko na hinatak ako patayo ni Avo.

Chapitre Quatre

Bago pa man ako makapagsalita ay nahila niya na ako mula sa mga babae. Mabuti na lang at walang nakakita sa mga nangyari dahil sigurado ako, mamaya lang ay kakalat na 'to! Sobrang sikat pa naman ng tao na 'to sa school!

"A-ano ba!" I said as I yanked my hand from his hand. Sobrang higpit ng hawak niya sa akin kaya naman wala ring saysay ang ginagawa kong ito. But I should not stop. Ayoko na isipin niya na willing ako sa paghatak niya sa akin papunta sa kung saan man.

Walang masyadong tao sa paligid dahil mayroon sigurong klase ang iba. Sobrang lakas pa rin ng kabog ng dibdib ko dahil kasama ko siya.

Ilang minuto pa ang lumipas bago kami nahinto. Nakita ko na papasok kami sa dorm ng mga *Dieux*.

"This is kidnapping!" sigaw ko pa pero wala ring silbi. Hindi niya pinapakinggan ang mga sinasabi ko. Basta siya, hatak-hatak pa rin ako.

Automatic na bumukas 'yung pinto at saka pinapasok niya ako sa loob. I was in awe because the place looked so majestic. Kung maganda na iyong dorm na tinitirhan ko, siguro triple pa ang ganda nito. I wanted to live here but I could not. I didn't want to be branded as a *Dieux*. Ayoko nung iiwasan ako o kaya naman ay kakaibiganin dahil lang doon. Hindi ko na nga magawa ang bagay na 'yun sa labas, kahit dito man lang sa loob

magkaroon ako ng totoong kaibigan.

Sa wakas, matapos ang ilang minutong paghatak niya ay tumigil din kami. We were in what I could say as the receiving area of their dorm.

I wanted to say something but my voice was missing. Nung mapatingin ako sa mga mata niya, pakiramdam ko nanghihina na naman ako.

"Why did you bring me here?" I managed to ask. Nakayuko ako upang hindi ko siya makita. Even his shadow could make my heart jump out of its ribcage.

"Sit," ang sabi niya. Umupo siya sa isa sa mga cream-coloured sofa roon at pinagkrus pa ang mga mahahaba niyang binti. I had been looking at this man from afar since the moment I met him. Alam ko na may kakaiba sa kanya... But being this close to him made me rethink things.

"Bakit mo ako dinala rito?"

His face was void of any emotions. Nakatingin lang siya sa mukha ko. Naiilang na ako dahil kahit na ipahalata ko na kitang-kita ko kung paano niya ako titigan, hindi pa rin siya tumitigil.

"I want you."

Kumunot ang noo ko. What did he just say?

"What?"

"You," sabi niya sabay turo sa akin. "I want you."

Halos malaglag ang panga ko dahil sa mga naririnig ko sa kanya. Ano? Gusto niya ako? Ni hindi niya pa nga ako kilala! Ni hindi ko pa nga siya kilala! You can't fall in love with someone whom you just met! That's insanity!

"You're crazy," I muttered under my breath. Tumayo ako. "I'm leaving."

Nagsimula na akong tumalikod. Papalapit na sana ako sa pintuan pero isang salita niya lang, napatigil na agad ako. Damn it! Damn his power over me! Damn the fact that with just one word, he could make my whole world stop!

"Stay."

Napako ako sa kinatatayuan ko. Unti-unti siyang naglakad papunta sa akin. My knees felt weak with just the thought of him behind me. He was far but it felt like I could feel his hot breath on my neck. Ano ba itong mga nararamdaman ko!

"Boe." And my heart started beating erratically. "Boe, right?"

Hindi ako nakasagot dahil unti-unti niya akong hinarap sa kanya. He was so close to me! Nakahawak ang mga kamay niya sa balikat ko. From where I was standing, I could see his blue eyes—those pair of rich blue eyes.

Para akong nahipnotismo. Hindi ko namalayan na tumango na pala ako sa tanong niya. Pagkatapos kong tumango ay inilagay niya ang kamay niya sa pisngi ko. Unti-unti niyang inilapit ang mukha niya sa mukha ko hanggang sa mamalayan ko na lang na hinahalikan niya ako.

Biglang huminto ang mundo ko dahil sa ginawa niya. I didn't have any idea about what to do. Nakatayo lang ako doon, nanlalaki ang mata. It was the first time anyone has the guts to kiss me! I was untouchable because of my family. Only this guy dared!

I could feel his lips on mine, kung paano ito gumalaw. Pakiramdam ko anytime mapupugto ang paghinga ko. Kung hindi lang siguro dahil sa kamay niya na nakahawak sa bewang ko, matagal na akong napaupo sa sahig.

Ten seconds? Twenty seconds? I did not know. I seriously had no idea how long the kiss lasted. It was like an out of the body experience. Kahit ngayon na magkahiwalay na ang labi namin, pakiramdam ko kinakapos pa rin ako ng hininga.

Unti-unting sumilay ang ngiti sa mukha niya.

"Mine." He said and then stared at my face.

Matapos iyon ay hinawakan niya ang kamay ko. Sabay kaming naglakad papunta sa klase namin. Kinuha niya kasi iyong schedule ko at nalaman niya na magkapareho kami ng lahat ng klase. Damn! Hindi ko na yata talaga siya matatakasan!

"'Yung kamay ko," I said habang naglalakad kami. Pinagtitinginan

kasi kami ng mga estudyante at hindi ako komportable. Hindi ko lang talaga mahatak iyong kamay ko dahil sa takot ko sa kanya. I could not say no to him—I knew I just couldn't.

He halted and then looked at me. "Why?"

"Maraming nakatingin." Pagkatapos ko pa lang sabihin iyon ay tinignan niya 'yung mga tao sa paligid. Right after that, nawala lahat ng mga tao sa paligid namin. Sobrang lakas talaga ng kapangyarihan niya sa loob ng eskwelahan na 'to. He's the law
personified.

"All right now?" he asked. Wala na akong nagawa kung hindi ang tumango. Tama naman siya, wala ng nakatingin sa amin.

Pumasok kami sa classroom namin. Masyadong maaga pa yata dahil wala pa iyong professor namin. Papasok na papasok pa lang kami pero pinagtitinginan at pinagbubulungan na kami. Nakayuko na naman ako. Bakit ba unang araw ko pa lang ay ako na ang nasa sentro ng atensyon?

"Avo," mahinang tawag sa kanya ni Night. Naiba na kami ng pwesto. Imbes na sa gitna, doon ako pinaupo ni Avo sa tabi niya. Siya na ang nasa gitna. "Ella's really mad."

"She'll get over it," sagot lang ni Avo. Napatango lang si Night na parang ayos na 'yung sagot na iyon. Hindi ko talaga sila maintindihan. Something was weird
about them yet I could not point a finger at it.

Oh, my god! Oo nga pala! Kakahiwalay lang nila ni Ella! Bakit ba nawaglit sa isipan ko 'yun!

"Is she your girlfriend now?" tanong ni Night habang nakatingin sa akin. Napayuko na naman ako. Bakit ba kasi nandito rin si Night? Hindi pa ba sapat na halos mamatay na ako sa kaba kay Avo, pati rin ba sa kaibigan niya, kakabahan ako?

Saglit na tumingin sa akin si Avo. "She's my wife."

Nanlaki naman agad ang mata ko. What?! Wife?! Nababaliw na ba siya?!

Balak ko pa sanang pilitìng magalit—kung kakayanin ko—pero dumating na iyong professor namin. Natahimik na lang ako sa kinauupuan ko. 'Di bale, kakausapin ko na siya mamaya. Hindi pupwede ito na bigla niya na lang akong hahatakin, hahalikan, tapos aangkinin niya na asawa niya ako? Ano siya? Maswerte?!

Mabilis lang na natapos ang klase. Wala na pala kaming class after dahil cancelled 'yung Mafia-related classes. Next week pa raw iyon magsisimula para makapag-adjust 'yung mga bago. Sobrang hassle daw kasi nun kaya dapat maka-adapt muna kami sa mga nangyayari rito.

I couldn't agree more. First day ko pa lang pero pakiramdam ko, mababaliw na ako.

"Your dorm?" tanong sa akin ni Avo.

Matipid ko na sinagot siya. Laking pasasalamat ko dahil hindi niya alam na *Dieux* ako dahil panigurado, live-in ang labas namin nito! Masyado siyang mabilis! First day pa lang, wife na ako! Ano bukas? May anak na kami?

Tumango lang siya. "Let's eat dinner together."

"Uuwi na ako," I said.

"Why?"

"Basta..."

Bigla siyang huminto sa paglalakad kaya naman napahinto rin ako. Magkahawak pa rin kasi kami ng kamay.

Magsasalita sana siya nung may ingay kami na narinig na papalapit sa amin. Nasa tapat na kami ng dorm ng mga *Dieux*. Papasok na sana kaming dalawa nung sinabi ko na uuwi na ako. Pero ngayon, naisip ko na sana, mas maaga akong nagsalita. Bakit ba palagi na lang akong naiipit sa gitna ng gulo?

"Let go of me!" sigaw nung babae na ang pangalan ay Ella. Shit naman talaga! Wala naman akong ginagawa pero mukhang sa akin siya galit! "I'll kill you both
if you don't get your hands off of me!"

Pinagkakalmot ni Ella 'yung mukha nila Fuji at Lorenzo. Hindi pa rin

siya binitiwan ng mga ito kaya naman bigla niyang sinipa sila sa baba. Wala pang ilang segundo ay nasa sahig na sila Fuji at Lorenzo habang dumadaing sa sakit.

She fixed herself first and then right after, she looked at me with such hate.

"You." Nakatingin siya sa akin at biglang nanginig na naman ang tuhod ko sa sobrang takot. Humakbang siya palapit sa akin pero iniharang ni Avo ang katawan niya. "Avo..." biglang lumambot ang boses ni Ella. Parang maiiyak na siya. Hindi ko naman siya masisi. Sa pagkakaalam ko, limang taon na sila. Limang taon na nauwi sa wala. Bakit naman kasi bigla silang naghiwalay?

"Stop it, Ella."

"I don't understand..." sabi niya, garagal ang boses. "We were fine. We were happy. Bakit biglang ayaw mo na?"

Para akong nanonood ng sine dahil sa mga nakikita ko. May babae na umiiyak at may lalaki na parang bato sa sobrang lamig.

"We had fun," sabi ni Avo. "But playtime is finally over."

"What do you mean?"

Tumingin sa akin si Avo. "I was just using you while waiting for her." Hinawakan niya ang kamay ko at saka binuksan ang pinto sa dorm nila. "You'll get over me."

Hindi na ako pumalag pa nung dinala niya ako papasok. Hindi ko yata kaya na maglakad mag-isa pabalik sa dorm. Tingin pa lang nung Ella, parang maiihi na ako sa takot. Baka bigla niya na lang akong saktan kapag nakita niya ako na nag-iisa. Mali talaga sila 'My. Mas delikado pa ang buhay ko dito sa loob ng *AdM*.

Umakyat kami sa ikalawang palapag. Nandun si Night na tahimik na nagbabasa ng libro.

"Ella?" tanong niya at tumango si Avo. Naiilang ako sa dalawa na ito. Pareho silang tahimik pero may magkaiba pa rin sa kanila. Si Avo, nakakatakot pero ewan ko, parang alam ko na safe ako sa kanya... Si Night naman, nakakatakot at misteryoso. "I hate dramas."

Naupo kami ni Avo sa isa pa sa mga sofa. Pilit niya ako na pinaupo sa tabi niya. Bakit ba napaka-clingy nito? Para bang bigla akong tatakbo kapag nabitiwan niya ang kamay ko.

"Fuck!" sigaw nung mga naglalakad papasok. I saw Fuji and Lorenzo emerge from the door. Pareho sila na nakahawak sa ibaba nila. "Pakiramdam ko nabaog ako! Tanginang Ella 'yan! Bangis talaga!"

Pareho silang dumiretso sa kusina at saka kumuha ng icepack. Pagkatapos nun ay umakyat na rin sila sa second floor. Ang weird ng structure ng lugar na 'to. Nasa second floor ang receiving area. Ang nasa baba ay kusina lang at isang malaking espasyo.

"Dude, kapag ako hindi nagkaanak, kasalanan mo 'to!" he said to Avo. Nakita niya na katabi ako ni Avo at bahagya siyang napahinto. He cursed under his breath. "Fuck."

Umupo si Fuji sa may katapat namin. Hindi ako makatingin nang maayos sa kanya dahil 'yung kamay niya ay nakapatong sa may ibaba niya. Dinadampian niya kasi nung icepack.

"Dude, alam mo naman na suportado ko lahat ng desisyon mo sa buhay pero paano si Ella? Dito rin nakatira 'yun kung hindi mo alam," he said. Sabi ni Cathy, mabait at maloko raw si Fuji pero bakit parang hindi naman? Pakiramdam ko ayaw niya sa akin. Pakiramdam ko galit siya sa akin.

"I know," he answered.

"Ano ang gagawin natin? Magwawala 'yun mga thrice a day for sure."

"She'll get over me," sabi na naman ni Avo.

"Alam mo naman na deads na deads 'yun sa 'yo! Tsaka paano kung 'yang si Boe mo naman ang saktan nun? Alam mo naman na may tama sa ulo si Ella kapag galit!"

Avo held my hand. "Touch one strand of her hair and I'll kill every person who had the misfortune of knowing her."

Chapitre Cinq

Contrary to what I feared, walang anumang masamang nangyari sa akin. Mabilis na kumalat ang balita na kami na ni Avo—it spread like a wildfire. Kaya naman sa first week ko pa lang dito sa *AdM*, pakiramdam ko isa na akong celebrity. Lahat ng estudyate pakiramdam ko kilala ako. Kapag naglalakad ako, sinusundan ako ng mga paningin nila. Kahit mga school officials, pakiramdam ko ilag sa akin.

Being linked to Avo was like having power bestowed upon you.

"Ayoko na pumasok," I said. Kakauwi ko lang mula sa klase. Kakatapos pa lang ng first week of class pero drained na drained na ako. Akala ko medyo madali na ang sistema rito pero nagkamali pala ako. Seryoso pa rin sila sa academics. Bakit nga ba kasi nakalimutan ko na ang mga nag-aaral dito ay tagapagmana ng mga business ng mga magulang nila? Of course they needed the best education at their disposal.

Cathy was on her bed. Mas nauna kasi siyang nakauwi sa akin.

"I know," she groaned. "Grabe! Pagod na ako ngayon pa lang. Paano na next week? Start na nung military training shiz ng school na 'to! Baka gumapang na ako pauwi!"

Bigla naman akong kinabahan. Marami na akong naririnig tungkol sa training na iyon. Sabi naman ni Avo, madali lang daw. But of course, bakit nga ba ako naniwala? Si Avo 'yun. Malamang sanay na sanay na

'yun sa mga ganon.

"Mahirap ba talaga?" I asked.

Cathy nodded. "Yeah, medyo mahirap lalo na kapag hindi ka sanay sa mga physical activities. Pero masasanay ka rin, swear. Medyo masaya lang 'yung gun exercises," she said and then beamed.

"Marunong kang bumaril?"

Kumunot ang noo niya sa tanong ko. "Duh!" sabi niya sabay tawa. "Ang weird naman na anak ako ng mga gumagawa ng baril tapos hindi ako marunong, 'di ba?"

Bigla kong nakagat ang labi ko. Shit. Nagpapanggap nga pala ako na Deuxième.

Dapat marunong akong bumaril. So I smiled at her. "Of course." Matapos iyon, nagsabi siya na huwag ko na siyang hintayin dahil wala na siyang balak kumain dahil gusto na lang niyang matulog. Hindi ko na siya pinigilan pa dahil mukhang pagod talaga si Cathy at gusto niya na magpahinga. But I, on the other hand, ay gustong kumain. My stomach was grumbling.

Tumayo ako at sinigurado ko na dala ko ang ID ko. Essential talaga 'to. Hindi ko alam kung paano ako makakasurvive kung wala akong ID. Halos dito nakasalalay ang buong pagtira ko sa loob ng *AdM*.

Saktong kakalabas ko pa lang ng dorm ko nung makita ko si Avo. Napasapo ako sa dibdib dahil sa gulat.

"Avo!" I said in surprise. "Bakit ka nandito?"

Sa loob ng isang linggo na magkasama kami, medyo nawala na ang ilang ko sa kanya. Medyo lang. Paminsan kasi ay nagugulat pa rin ako sa kanya. Masyado siyang possessive, masyadong touchy. Para bang bula ako na mawawala kapag binitiwan niya.

"Dinner," he said. Hinawakan niya na naman ang kamay ko. Nung una, hindi ako sanay. Pero ewan ko, after a few days, nasanay na rin ako na hawak niya ang kamay ko. Parang hindi kumpleto ang araw niya kapag hindi niya hawak ang kamay ko. Or was it just me?

"What do you want to eat?"

Tahimik kaming naglalakad. Friday night ngayon kaya maraming tao na nagkalat. Nakalimutan ko na pumunta kanina sa office ng headmistress para magtanong kung paano ko makakausap ang mga magulang ko. Masyado kasi akong napagod sa school works.

Gusto ko silang makausap. Hindi para magalit. I was past being mad. I just wanted to know what's happening to them. Of course mga magulang ko sila.

"Avo," I asked while we were in the middle of a stroll in a cold Friday night. "Paano ko makakausap ang mga magulang ko?"

Umiling siya. "They'll contact you when it's immediate."

"Hindi ba pwede na ako ang tumawag?"

He shook his head again. "No."

"Bakit?"

"The security in this place is impeccable. No one gets to leak information from the inside. If your parents need to hear from you, you'll know it. But for now, focus on what's important."

Hindi na ako sumagot kahit ang totoo, hindi ko naintindihan ang mga sinasabi ni Avo. He's too mysterious. He's a code hard to read. Gusto kong sumuko pero mukhang hindi maaari. Palagi kasi siyang nasa tabi ko. Para bang kahit ayaw ko, wala na akong kawala.

Nakarating kami sa isang restaurant. As usual, puno na naman ito. Hindi ko alam kung bakit kahit saan pumunta ang mga *Dieux* ay nasusundan sila ng mga babae. Baka nga tama si Cathy, gusto ng mga babae na 'to na umangat ang ranggo nila.

Ipinaghatak ako ni Avo ng upuan.

"Thank you," I curtly responded.

Naupo na kami. Kasama namin si Lorenzo, Night, at ang girlfriend niya na si Laurie. Tahimik pa rin si Lorenzo as usual. Si Night naman, kinukulit nung girlfriend niya. Hindi ko nga maintindihan si Night, e. May weird talaga sa kanya.

"Stop staring." Napatingin ako kay Avo na nakakunot ang noo. "You won't like it when I'm jealous."

Parang gusto kong matawa kay Avo. Isang linggo pa lang kaming magkakilala pero sobrang mahal niya na ako. Kahit saan ako pumunta, gusto niya kasama ko siya. Gusto niya palagi niyang hawak ang kamay ko. Ngayon naman, kahit kaibigan niya pinagseselosan niya. Tinanong ko naman si Cathy, sabi niya hindi naman daw ganun si Avo... Matagal na rito sa *AdM* si Cathy at sabi niya na sa five years na relationship ni Avo at Ella, never naging showy si Avo. He's always been the reserved and cold one. Pero bakit parang hindi naman?

"Kaibigan mo siya," I said and rolled my eyes.

"And you're my wife. Learn to behave properly."

Napailing na lang ako sa logic ng tao na 'to. Mabuti na lang at walang pari sa loob ng lugar na 'to dahil sigurado ako na mabilis pa sa alas-onse na ipapakasal niya kaming dalawa.

Umorder na kami ng pagkain. If there's one thing I enjoy being with Avo, it's that he pays for everything. Kapag magkasama kami, hindi ako nagbabayad. Not that I didn't have money but I absolutely enjoy the perks.

Habang naghihintay, nag-usap silang tatlo. Kapag nag-uusap kasi sila, hindi kami nagsasalita ni Laurie. Ako, dahil ayoko lang. Si Laurie, pakiramdam ko kasi kahit na matagal na siyang nakakahalubilo sa mga Diuex, hindi pa rin siya palagay. After all, hindi naman siya *Dieux*. She's lower than them—than us.

"Where's Fuji?" asked Avo.

Ibinaba ni Lorenzo iyong binabasa niya na libro. "Who knows? He's been weird lately. Napansin mo ba, Night?"

Tumango naman si Night. "Yeah." Saglit na tinignan niya ako at saka ibinalik ang tingin kay Avo. "Lumalabas siya kapag gabi pero bumabalik din. Maybe he's meeting somebody."

"Ella?" tanong naman ni Avo.

Kung ibang babae siguro, magagalit na concerned pa rin 'yung boyfriend nila sa ex nila. Pero ako? Ewan pero mas natutuwa ako kay Avo ngayon na nakikita ko na nag-aalala pa rin siya kay Ella. I feel for the girl.

They've been together for five years. I could only imagine the pain she must be going through because of their sudden break-up.

"She's getting better," sagot ni Lorenzo. "Tumigil na siya sa kababato ng plato. I think that's a huge improvement."

Bahagya akong natawa. May personal cook kasi sa dorm ng mga *Dieux*. Doon talaga sila kumakain. Pero dahil kay Ella, dito sila kumakain sa labas. Naubos kasi 'yung mga plato nila. Literal na naubos. Pinagbabato kasi ni Ella lahat.

Napatingin silang lahat sa akin dahil sa bahagya kong pagtawa. I immediately put a halt to my chuckle.

"Why did you stop?" Avo asked.

Umiling ako at pinipigilan ko pa rin na matawa. "Wala."

"You look lovelier when you're happy. I hope I'm making you happy."

Nakita ko na napailing na lang sila Lorenzo at Night kay Avo. Wala talagang preno sa mga sinasabi niya pagdating sa akin.

Binigyan ko siya ng isang maliit na ngiti. Kung ibang babae siguro, in love na sila kay Avo. I mean, he looks really good, matalino, mayaman, nasa pinakamataas na rank. He's also very sweet and very attentive. 'Yung tipo ng lalaki na gugustuhin ng kahit sinong babae.

Maybe I'll get there. One step at a time. Masyado pa kasing mabilis para sa akin.

Dumating na 'yung pagkain namin at tahimik kami na kumain. Right after, nagpaalam na kami ni Avo.

He said he wanted to take a night stroll with me. Hindi ko alam kung saan pupunta si Lorenzo... But I had an idea about what Night and Laurie might do. Naalala ko na naman kasi 'yung condom incident. Nalulumpo kaya talaga si Laurie?

Kanina pa lumilipad ang isip ko kaya hindi ko napansin kung saan na kami naglalakad. Nandun pala kami napunta sa parang park.

"Bakit tayo huminto?" I asked him. Bigla kasi kaming huminto sa paglalakad.

He called my name and I looked at him. "Are you happy?" he asked.

"Ha?"

"Things happened pretty quick. I knew I took you by surprise but I hope I'm making you happy." Hinawakan niya ang kamay ko. I looked at his eyes—those eyes that promised a good future. I smiled at him. I wasn't in love with him but I could definitely see myself falling. He wasn't hard to love.

"Mapupunta rin tayo d'yan," I answered him.

"Can't we take a shortcut?"

Umiling ako. "Inasawa mo na nga ako agad, pati ba naman sa falling in love, mamadaliin mo ako?"

I meant that as a joke pero mukhang na-offend ko si Avo. Grabe naman itong tao na 'to, masyadong sensitive. Sobrang ibang-iba talaga ang Avo na kaharap ko sa Avo na naririnig ko sa ibang tao. Hindi naman siya nakakatakot. Mukhang siya pa nga ang natatakot sa akin at sa mga sinasabi ko, e.

"Uy, joke lang," I said and playfully punched his arm. "Galit ka ba sa akin?"

He looked at me and I was lost. Grabe siyang tumingin. Sobrang lakas ng intensity. Parang kahit sa mata lang niya, kitang-kita ko na na totoo ang sinasabi niya na mahal niya ako.

Possible kaya 'yun? Na mahalin mo 'yung tao na hindi mo pa masyadong kilala? Akala ko hindi possible. Akala ko isa lang iyong malaking kalokohan. But looking at Avo made me challenge my beliefs...

Here I was, looking at a man who's utterly in love with me.

"I can get mad but I can't stay mad at you." He took a step closer and my heart skipped at beat. "But I'll respect your wish. We'll take this slow."

Inilapit niya ang mukha niya sa akin. Lumakas ang tibok ng puso ko. The anticipation was killing me.

Sobrang lapit na ng labi niya sa labi ko. I was wanton with waiting. "I'll make you fall slowly... so slow..." he said. Damn. Palapit na ng papalapit. "Slowly and then all at once."

And then he kissed me. And I swear I saw fireworks inside my mind when
his lips touched mine.

Nakapikit lang ako habang hinahalikan niya ako. Hindi ko maipaliwanag kung ano ang nararamdaman ko. He first kissed me when he said I was his. Ngayon niya lang ako hinalikan ulit. The first time was good... but this was mind-blowing.

The way his lips brushed against mine, the way his hands held my waist. Hindi ko maipaliwanag ang nararamdaman ko. Parang mayroong magic.

"And one day you'll wake up, you're as mad as I am for you." He said as he pulled away from me. Nakatingin siya sa mga mata ko. Promise of love was very visible in his eyes.

Chapitre Six

The next few days were but a blur. Ni wala akong maalala na minuto na hindi kami magkasama ni Avo. His presence was starting to grow on me. Kung dati, naaasiwa ako sa pagsunud-sunod niya sa akin, ngayon, ako na ang naghahanap sa kanya kapag hindi ko siya nakikita. I guess persistence really has its merits.

"I can't believe your performance on the diagnostics!" sabi ni Cathy sa akin. Kanina kasi, dinala kami sa shooting range para sa diagnostics exam. Dito malalaman kung nasaan na 'yung comprehensible input mo para malaman kung saang level ka ilalagay. Halos lahat ng kasabayan ko e nasa expert level na, may ilan na intermediate, ako lang yata ang nasa beginners... Sumabit pa nga lang din yata ako roon.

Hindi ko alam kung paano ko ipapaliwanag kay Cathy na oo, kasama ako sa pamilya na involved sa mga ganitong bagay pero hindi ibig sabihin niyon na mahilig ako sa karahasan. Was it my fault that I was a peace-loving citizen?

"Kinakabahan lang ako," I answered. May re-test naman bukas para sa mga kagaya ko. Ang hirap naman kasi na maiiwan ako sa level na 'to.

Matapos nun ay naligo na si Cathy. Ako naman, nakahiga lang sa kama. Paano ako magsusurvive sa lugar na 'to? Akala ko medyo maayos na, e. Mayroon naman pala na normal na degrees dito pero hindi ko

napansin na mas inclined pa rin sila sa kung ano ang kailangan ng mga pamilya namin. Wala na yatang takasan talaga sa kinamulatan naming buhay.

Tumayo ako mula sa kama ko. I was utterly spent but I couldn't fall asleep. Masyado akong bothered sa resulta ng diagnostics. Kinuha ko lang 'yung jacket ko at saka lumabas.

Maganda rito sa labas ng *AdM* kapag gabi dahil wala ng masyadong tao. Akala mo ang tahimik, akala mo ang peaceful... But I knew there was no second that I was alone. Kahit saan ako tumingin, may camera. Bawat galaw namin, recorded. It felt like there was no room for mistakes.

Hindi ko napansin na dinala ako ng mga paa ko sa harap ng dorm nila Avo. Ilang segundo na nakatayo lang ako sa labas nun. Hindi ko alam kung bakit ako napunta rito. Was I unconsciously missing him?

I was about to turn my heel around when someone spoke from behind me.

"Avo?" he said. Nakita ko na nakatayo si Night mula sa likuran ko. Napahawak ako sa dibdib ko dahil sa gulat. Bakit ba napaka-creepy ng tao na 'to? Hindi ko talaga siya maintindihan!

Tumango lang ako pero hindi ko pa rin maialis ang kunot sa noo ko.

"Bakit ka nasa labas?" Ipinakita niya sa akin 'yung iniinom niya. "Lumabas ka para bumili niyan?" I asked the obvious. Tumango naman siya. I just noticed how he was such a child sometimes. Napaka-contradicting ng personality ng isang 'to.

"Wanna come in? Nasa loob yata siya," he said pero hindi pa man ako nakakasagot, binuksan niya na 'yung gate. Nung hindi pa ako naglalakad, tumalikod siya at tinignan lang ako. Hindi siya nagsasalita pero 'yung tingin niya pa lang, it already said a thousand words.

Pumasok ako sa loob at dumiretso kami sa third floor kung nasaan ang kwarto ni Avo.

"Maghihintay na lang ako sa second floor," I said. Ang awkward naman kasi na kakatok ako sa kwarto ni Avo. I mean, oo, girlfriend niya ako pero pakiramdam ko, wala pa naman kami sa ganung setup. Medyo

weird.

"And risk the chance of Ella seeing you?" sabi niya at saka umiling. "Kumatok ka kapag ready ka na. Matutulog na ako," he said tapos pumasok na siya sa kwarto niya. Ang weirdo niya talaga.

Nakatayo ako sa labas ng pinto ni Avo, thinking about what to do. Dapat ba akong kumatok o hindi? Pero tama si Night... mas gugustuhin ko na na kung anuman ang isipin ni Avo kaysa ang makita ako ni Ella rito. That girl gave me the scare. Oo, wala pa siyang ginagawa sa akin physically but I could see the hatred she's harboring for me. Kitang-kita ko na kahit unti-unti, patindi nang patindi iyong galit niya sa akin. The kind of resentment that results to utmost destruction. The kind that leaves everything in a state of obliteration.

And so I heaved a deep breath and knocked. Here went nothing.

My heart was thumping wildly inside my chest. One. Two. Three. And then I lost count.

Rinig na rinig ko ang malakas na tibok ng puso ko habang naghihintay na pagbuksan ako ng pinto ni Avo. Susuko na sana ako at maglalakad pabalik sa dorm ko nung marinig ko ang boses ni Ella. Biglang nanginig ang tuhod ko sa takot.

"Shut it," rinig ko na sabi niya. "I'm not crazy, okay!"

Mayroon siyang kausap pero hindi ko masyadong marinig kung ano ang sinasabi niya. Basta ang alam ko lang, sa sobrang kaba ko, napihit ko 'yung seradura ng pintuan ng kwarto ni Avo.

I was consumed by the fear of seeing Ella na hindi ko napansin na nasa harap ko si Avo—who was wearing nothing but a towel that was hanging so dangerously low.

Biglang nag-init at namula ang mukha ko sa nakita ko. Napatalikod ako.

"Sorry," I said. "Nasa labas kasi si Ella... at natakot ako na makita niya kaya pumasok ako rito ng walang paalam. Sorry..."

Base sa naririnig ko, nagbibihis na siya. Pakiramdam ko hihimatayin na lang ako bigla! Wala akong nakikita, naririnig ko lang ang bawat

ginagawa niya pero kung anu-ano na ang pumapasok sa utak ko. Damn Avo! Sa ilang araw na pagsama ko sa kanya, may nag-iba na talaga sa akin.

"It's alright," sagot niya. "You're welcome here anytime, wife."

Napaikot na naman ang mata ko. Hindi yata talaga ako masasanay na tinatawag niya na wife.

"You can look now," sabi niya at dahan-dahan ako na umikot. Mabuti na lang at bihis na siya ngayon. He was just wearing a boxer shorts and white shirt pero ang gwapo niya sa paningin ko. Nakaupo siya sa edge ng kama niya at saka tinapik 'yung space sa tabi niya. "Come here," he gently said.

Parang may sariling isip ang mga paa ko at naglakad papunta sa kanya. Naupo ako sa tabi niya. Bigla niya akong niyakap. I let myself get lost. Isang buong araw ko siyang hindi nakita dahil may ginawa ang mga Dieux kaya naman miss na miss ko na rin siya...

"I missed you," he said. Hindi ako sumagot. Ayokong bigyan siya ng rason para mas ikulong pa ako. It was enough that I, myself, knew that there was already something. I needed not to complicate things even more.

After a few seconds, humiwalay na siya sa yakap. Tinignan niya ako sa mata ko. "Why are you so scared of Ella?" he asked. He was caressing my face with his thumbs and I was fighting the urge to close my eyes and enjoy the sensation. "Haven't I promised you that I would protect you?"

Tumango ako.

"Then why are you still so scared?"

Hindi ko rin alam ang sagot. Hindi ko alam kung bakit isang tingin pa lang ni Ella sa akin, kulang na lang tumakbo ako palayo sa sobrang takot. It was like she was nothing but bad news.

"I'll destroy anyone who hurts you, you hear me?"

I nodded again.

"So please don't be scared, okay?"

I looked into his eyes and I knew he was telling the truth. "Okay."

Matapos nun ay bumaba kami ni Avo para kumain. Wala na si Ella; wala akong pakielam kung nasaan man siya. At isa pa, bigla akong nabuhayan sa sinabi ni Avo. He will protect me. Alam ko sandali pa lang kaming magkakilala pero pakiramdam ko ay mapagkakatiwalaan ko siya... Hindi ko maipaliwanag pero sa kanya, pakiramdam ko palagi akong ligtas. It was weird to feel this way but it felt so right.

"Bakit wala kayo ni Night sa class kanina?"

"Mafia," he said.

"Akala ko bawal tumawag sa labas?"

"Being a *Dieux* has its perks," he said. Napakagat naman ako sa labi ko. Kasalanan ko na naman pala 'to. Kung sana hindi ko sinabi sa headmistress na irevoke ang kung anuman na meron ako bilang *Dieux*, e 'di sana makakausap ko pa sila 'My. Pwede ko pa kaya siyang pakiusapan? Pero ayoko rin naman kasi na malaman ng mga tao rito ang tungkol sa akin... I didn't need any more attention. I was getting more than enough.

Mukhang napansin ni Avo ang pagbabago ng mood ko.

"You could marry me so you'll be a *Dieux* as well," he kidded. Napangiti lang ako at nailing. "Cheer up, wife. I'll find a way for you to talk to your parents, alright?"

I nodded. But I knew it wouldn't be possible. There was no way I was going to tell him about my parents. Not until I was certain about things.

After indulging ourselves with food, naglakad na naman kami sa labas. Walking is our thing. Since Avo was aware that this—all of this—was too fast, gusto niya na mag-usap kami. Madalas, naglalakad lang kami, nag-uusap. Getting to know each other. Ang weird, noh? Nauna niya akong halikan, tapos ginawang girlfriend, tapos ngayon pa lang kami talaga nagkakakilala. Everything about us was weird... but nevertheless it was damn exciting.

Natawa sa akin si Avo nung nasabi ko 'yung resulta ng diagnostics. Hinampas ko siya. Sabi ng 'wag siyang tatawa, e.

"I didn't mean to laugh," he said, trying to stifle his laughter. "No one

fails a diagnostic... but your performance was horrid."

I just had to roll my eyes.

"Well, hindi lahat ng tao ay mahilig sa baril," I said. "Not me, okay?"

Nakangiti pa rin si Avo but admiration was visible in his eyes. Napailing siya sa akin at saka hinawakan ang kamay ko. I let myself follow him. At hindi nga ako nagkakamali, doon kami tumigil sa shooting range.

"We'd have to fix that problem, wife," he said as he was filling the magazine with empty bullets.

"Avo..." I said. "Ayokong matutong bumaril."

"Wife, this is not a matter up for debate. You have to learn how to shoot."

"I can survive without the guns."

"Not in the kind of life we have, no."

But this wasn't the kind of life I had planned out for me. My parents promised... They promised that a few years from now, we'd give this kind of life up. We'd live a peaceful and tranquil life. Away from all the violence and the deaths.

Inilagay niya 'yung baril sa kamay ko at saka pumwesto sa likuran ko. Alam ko na ramdam niya ang panginginig ng kamay ko. I think I will never get the hang of it. And I would never want to be at ease around guns.

"Relax," he breathed on my neck. He guided me. "You hold it like this," sabi niya sa akin. Ikinulong niya ako sa pagitan ng mga braso niya at tinuruan niya ako kung paano ang tamang paghawak ng baril. "You cock the gun." Iniayos niya ang pagkasa ng baril. "Look at the target," he said and my heart started to get wild inside my chest.

And when he whispered, "And you pull the trigger." And I swear I almost lost it all.

Hindi ko alam kung paano nangyari iyon pero tumama sa pinakagitna 'yung bala. Kanina, ni kahit sa malapit man lang doon av hindi ko magawa. Ramdam ko na frustrated na sa akin 'yung professor

pero hindi niya pinapahalata. Pero 'yung mga classmates ko, kulang na lang pagtawanan nila ako.

And now, my heart was swelling with false pride.

"You need this for your protection."

"I thought you said you'd always protect me?" I said with questioning eyes. I knew I was playing a dangerous game but I was done pretending to not feel anything.

Humakbang ako palapit sa kanya.

"I will," he answered.

"Then I won't need any of this," I said before I closed the gap between us and kissed him full on the lips.

Hindi ko alam kung saan ko nakuha ang lakas para gawin 'to but damn it felt so right. The feel of his skin against mine, the way his lips moved on top of mine. Pakiramdam ko anumang oras ay tatakasan na ako ng bait. Iyong kamay niya sa bewang ko, pakiramdam ko mababaliw na ako.

My breathing came from shallow to fragmented pieces. Hingal na hingal ako. Who would have thought a kiss could render me so breathless?

"Fuck," he kept on saying as we engaged in mind-rattling kiss. I had no idea where my hands wandered, heck, I didn't even care one bit. Ang mahalaga sa akin, malinaw na ang lahat.

As I continued to kiss Avo with all my soul, I realized one thing.

"You're mine as much as I am yours." I said, staring into his eyes.

Chapitre Sept

"Maybe you were just nervous yesterday. Good job, Estrella," sabi sa akin ng Professor ko. Nagpasalamat lang ako at saka umalis na. Mabuti naman at pumasa na ako finally sa diagnostics. Hindi kasi ako tinigilan ni Avo nung isang gabi hanggang hindi ako nasasanay. Sabi niya, oo at palagi niya akong poprotektahan pero kailangan ko pa rin daw masanay. For his sanity's sake, he said that I should learn how to shoot.

Sabi niya kasi ay baka mabaliw siya sa pag-aalala sa akin. Thinking about how helpless I would be in times of danger.

I got my things from the locker area. Nung isasara ko na 'yung pinto nung locker ko, may narinig ako na kalabog.

"Hello?" malakas ko na sigaw. Ako na lang kasi ang naiwan dahil ako ang pinakahuling nag-diagnostics. Halos pagabi na rin at wala ng masyadong tao sa campus. Pinilit ko na lakasan ko ang loob ko kahit na sa totoo lang ay kinakabahan ako. This school always gave me the creep. Lalo na kapag ganito na malapit ng magdilim at mag-isa lang ako.

Isinara ko na ang locker ko at kinuha ang gamit ko. Mabilis ako na naglakad, patakbo papunta sa pintuan.

"Shit!" sigaw ko nung may malakas na naman na kalabog. Parang tatalon na palabas ng dibdib ko ang puso ko sa sobrang kaba. Halos liparin ko na ang pintuan dahil natatakot na talaga ako.

Nung pagdating ko sa may pintuan, medyo gumaan na ang pakiramdam ko dahil nagkaroon na ako ng pag-asa. Pero hindi pa rin pala.

"You've got to be kidding me," I groaned. Naka-lock iyong pinto at hindi ko mabuksan. "Ugh!" sigaw ko nung sinipa ko iyong pinto. Parang sinaktan ko lang iyong sarili ko dahil matibay talaga iyong pinto.

I looked around me and realized that I would be stuck here until tomorrow.

"It's alright," I reminded myself. It would be like the old times. Iyong mga panahon na kailangan akong itago nila 'My sa isang madilim na kwarto para hindi ako makita nung mga kaaway nila. 'Yung mga panahon na pakiramdam ko kaibigan ko ang dilim. Siya kasi ang palagi kong kasama.

Memories from the past flooded my mind. Kahit anong hirap na pagtakas ang gawin ko, babalik at babalik pa rin yata ako rito. Wala na yatang kawala talaga.

I sat on the ground and pepped talk myself. Kailangan kong maging malakas. I shouldn't let fear swallow me alive.

But as the minutes passed, I noticed that the temperature seemed to be rising. I shivered in the cold, my teeth chattering in the icy environment. Naisuot ko na lahat ng pwede kong maisuot pero nilalamig pa rin ako. Was I sick? Bakit parang ang lamig-lamig?

Slowly, my breathing became shallow. Ang hirap huminga. Ang lamig-lamig.

"Avo..." I said before I lost consciousness and everything turned black.

My head was swirling and I couldn't breathe properly. I felt so sick. I have never felt this sick. I tried to move my hand but it hurt. I opened my eyes and saw that there was IV stuck in my hands.

"Are you crazy? No! Hindi pwede!"

My vision was still blurry but I could see Avo's friends. Hinanap ng paningin ko si Avo pero wala siya. I couldn't even recognize the place I was in.

"Avo will kill us," Night said. "Ikaw, Lorenzo, what do you think?"

There was a pause. I wanted to get their attention but my voice was too weak. Ang sakit-sakit talaga ng ulo ko. I felt like my head was being pounded by hundreds of hammer. Parang binibiyak ang ulo ko.

"Fuji is right. Avo will definitely have Ella's head once na malaman niya ang nangyari kay Boe. It doesn't matter if she's guilty or not—we all know how Avo will react whenever Boe's involved."

Hindi ko maintindihan kung ano ang pinag-uusapan nila. The last thing I remembered was that I was so cold... Sobrang lamig na pakiramdam ko ay mamamatay na ako.

"But Night is also right. Kapag naman nalaman ni Avo na hindi natin sinabi, he'll kill us."

Fuji cut off. "But nothing happened to her, right? Nakita naman siya ni Night and she's recovering. Can we just let this one pass? Ella's our friend."

Hindi na sumagot pa si Night at Lorenzo. I slowly opened my eyes and tried to speak but my voice barely even registered. Nung marinig ako nila Night, agad nila akong nilapitan. Worry was etched all over their face.

"How are you feeling?" Night asked me. Tinulungan niya ako na makaupo nang maayos.

"Where am I?" I asked. Inilibot ko ang tingin ko at nakita ko na wala ako sa kwarto ko. "Nasa hospital ba ako?" he nodded. "Ano ang nangyari?"

I could never feel at ease around them. Kay Avo lang ako napapanatag... minsan kay Night. His presence was calming. Pero hindi ako kailanman napanatag sa presensya ni Fuji at Lorenzo... Hindi ko kasi

sila mabasa. Hindi ko sila maìntindihan. Alam ko naman na kaya lang nila ako pinapakisamahan ay dahil kay Avo. If not for Avo, I doubt if they would even talk to me.

"What can you remember?" asked Night.

Sinabi ko sa kanya lahat ng naaalala ko. Na nasa locker room lang naman ako para kuhanin ang mga gamit ko. Na mayroon akong narinig na ingay. Na tumakbo ako papunta sa pintuan dahil kinabahan ako sa ingay. Na sarado iyong pintuan. Na pakiramdam ko, unti-unting lumalamig. Na sa sobrang lamig, nawalan na ako ng malay.

Night was digesting everything that I said. Hinintay ko lang siya dahil sa totoo lang, wala naman akong ideya kung ano talaga ang nangyari. Hindi ko rin gusto na pagbintangan si Ella. Hindi naman siguro siya 'yung tao na kayang pumatay dahil lang nasaktan...

But aren't we all from families whose hands are covered with innocent blood?

"I already checked the CCTV at wala namang nakita na kakaiba," Lorenzo said. "Maybe the perpetuator knows all the blind spots. Walang nakita kahit likod man lang."

Napatango si Night. Tinignan niya si Fuji. "Where was Ella last night?"

"You can't be serious! Pinagbibintangan niyo ba si Ella?" galit na sabi ni Fuji. Tinignan niya ako at kita ko ang galit sa mukha niya. "She was with me last night, okay? Umiiyak siya dahil kay Avo kaya hindi siya ang hinahanap niyo."

"We just want to be sure," sabi ni Lorenzo.

"Well, fuck you and your assurance. Bahala kayo dyan!" sabi niya at saka umalis sa kwarto. My heart throbbed. Bakit ba galit na galit siya sa akin? Wala naman akong ginagawa sa kanya...

Cathy said that Fuji was the nicest among the Dieux pero kapag sa akin, parang ayaw na ayaw niya. He detested me so much.

"Don't mind him," sabi ni Night. "Are you feeling alright?"

Tumango ako. Nagpaalam saglit sa amin si Lorenzo, sabi niya may

aalamin lang daw siya. Hindi na ako nagtanong dahil hindi rin naman talaga kami close... But he's better than Fuji. At least Lorenzo tolerates me. Not unlike Fuji who's so upfront about his dislike.

"Si Avo?" I asked.

"He's out." Kumunot ang noo ko. "Family matters."

"Palagi ba talaga siyang umaalis?"

He nodded. "You're aware about his family, right?" Tumango ako pero sinabi ko na hindi ko rin masyadong alam. I spent almost all my life inside the walls of our house. Ultimo pag-aaral, kontrolado ng mga magulang ko. Halos mangmang ako pagdating sa mga bagay na ito. Ang alam ko lang ay 'yung mga nakukwento sa akin ni Cathy. "Outside the walls of this academy, maraming nangyayaring gulo sa mga Mafia. The past few years have been the toughest. And being that Avo's family is at the top, his family's in constant danger. Just yesterday, his older sister got kidnapped."

Nanlaki ang mata ko sa mga nalaman ko.

"But she's already been found. Avo's out—making sure that whoever did that will get his own taste of hell."

There was shiver in my spine. The image of Avo killing someone made my knees tremble in fear.

"Don't fear him. He'll never hurt you," sabi sa akin ni Night nung mabasa niya ang takot sa mga mata ko.

I smiled at him. His presence really calms my nerves. Something about Night was so familiar. "I know," sagot ko sa kanya. "When will he return?"

"Maybe tomorrow," he said. "Can I ask you something?"

Tumango ako. I consider him a friend kahit hindi niya alam. Sa lugar na 'to, dapat mayroon kang kaibigan. Because if not, no one will watch your back for you.

"Don't tell Avo about any of this." Hindi pa man siya nakakatapos ay tumango na ako. Narinig ko naman kasi ang pinag-aawayan nila ni Fuji kanina. Naiintindihan ko ang pinanggalingan ni Fuji... Panigurado na

magagalit si Avo kapag nalaman niya. At panigurado ay si Ella nga ang una niyang pagbibintangan. "Thank you," he said.

Nginitian ko siya. "Can I now ask for a favor?"

"Sure."

"Food," I said and my stomach grumbled. Napailing siya sa akin pero nag-dial na siya para magpa room service. Habang naghihintay kami, nagkwentuhan muna kami ni Night. Actually, ako lang talaga ang nagtatanong. Sumasagot lang siya sa mga sinasabi ko. Tahimik kasi talaga siya pero hindi kasing tahimik ni Avo. Nagsasalita si Night kapag kailangan.

"Where's Laurie?"

Nagkibit balikat siya.

"But she's your girlfriend, right?" tanong ko. Medyo naguguluhan kasi ako sa arrangement nilang dalawa.

"Sure."

"But you love her?"

"Love's depth will never be fully quantified. Do I like her? Yes. Do I care about her? Definitely. Do I love her? Who knows?" sabi niya. Napakunot na lang ako ng noo sa sagot niya. Ang simple lang naman ng sinabi ko pero para akong nalunod sa sagot niya.

Maya-maya pa ay dumating na ang pagkain. Medyo mainit pa kaya pinalalamig ko muna. Baka kasi mapaso ang dila ko, e.

"Thank you nga pala sa kagabi... If not for you, baka patay na ako..." Hindi na siya sumagot pero ramdam ko naman na ngumiti siya. Night was such a weird dude. Weird but nevertheless comforting and soothing.

Iniwan niya muna ako saglit para raw makakain ako. Baka pupuntahan niya muna si Laurie, who knows. Sana mahal ni Night si Laurie. Mukha kasing mahal na mahal ni Laurie si Night... Sino ba naman ang tatagal ng ilang taon kung hindi mo mahal ang isang tao, 'di ba?

Hinipan ko muna iyong soup bago ko simulang higupin. I was in my third spoonful when my throat began to feel thicker and thicker as

seconds passed by. My heart started beating erratically. Breathing became a struggle.

I wanted to shout but no words were coming from my mouth.

Nahulog iyong mangkok sa sahig kasabay ng pagkahulog ko.

Chapitre Huit

Hirap na hirap akong huminga pero narinig ko pa rin ang boses ni Night na sinisigaw ang pangalan ko. I couldn't exactly focus on anything—breathing alone was too much to do at the moment. My hand was clutched tightly on my chest. I was trying my best to keep breathing. I felt like I would die any moment soon.

Doctors and nurses crowded me as I closed my eyes.

The next few hours were torture. They kept on pumping the poison out of my stomach. Apparently, someone tried to kill me by putting poison in my soup. Hindi ko alam kung sino ang may galit sa akin na ganito katindi para gawin ito... Kagabi, sinubukan niya akong patayin sa sobrang lamig, ngayon naman gusto niya akong lasunin. Whoever did this is very keen on weeding me out from the world.

Sino ba ang may ganitong katinding galit sa akin? I was in this place for just almost a month but by the length the person who did this is willing to take, pakiramdam ko buong buhay na siyang galit sa akin. How could someone harbor such resentment?

By the time the doctors were done with me, I was so spent.

"Water," I managed to choke out. Agad naman akong inabutan ni Night ng tubig. Hindi na siya umalis pa sa tabi ko. Simula nung nalason ako, kahit isang segundo hindi siya umalis. He was watching me with

hawk-eyes. Naiintindihan ko naman siya. Kung ako man ang nasa kalagayan niya, hindi ko siya iiwan. Every second felt more dangerous than the last.

After I was done drinking, tinignan niya ako.

"Sorry," he mumbled. "It's my fault. I should've checked the soup first."

Gusto kong matawa kay Night. How was any of this his fault? He was the one who found me when I was freezing to death. He was the one who called the doctors when I was barely breathing. If anything, I should be thanking him.

I wanted to speak up but my throat felt so dry. Walang kalaman-laman ang tyan ko dahil inalis lahat ng mga doctor. Baka kasi may maiwan pa na lason... Night said that the headmistress came by while I was sleeping. Kinakabahan siguro 'yun. My parents will have her head if anything bad happens to me.

Instead of speaking I just weakly smiled at him.

"Matulog ka na," I heard him say. "Babantayan kita."

With that, I was able to lull myself to sleep. The next few days were alright. Hinatid ako ni Night sa dorm namin at siya na ang bahala na mag-excuse sa akin kung bakit hindi ako makakapasok sa school. Kinausap niya rin si Cathy na alagaan ako. Kilig na kilig nga si Cathy nung kinausap siya ni Night.

Sabi ni Night, bukas na raw ang balik ni Avo. Kaya naman nandito lang ako sa kwarto, trying to regain my strength. Ayoko na mapansin niya na may kakaiba. Night tried his best para hindi na kumalat pa ang mga nangyari. I wouldn't let his efforts go in vain.

"I bought food," sabi ni Cathy sabay pakita sa akin ng takeout mula sa restaurant. "Don't worry, safe 'to." Kumagat siya sa kakainan ko. "See? Walang poison."

I smiled at her. Hindi naman niya kailangang gawin 'to pero ginagawa niya. Cathy's a nice person. Mabuti na lang at kaibigan ko siya.

Kumain lang ako at binigay niya naman sa akin 'yung notes na namiss

ko. Kinikilig pa siya habang nagkukwento dahil si Night ang nag-abot sa kanya. Hindi naman kasi kami classmates ni Cathy; si Night at Avo ang classmates ko.

"Ang gwapo talaga ni Night!" she gushed. I was just fondly looking at her. Ang cute niya kasi habang namumula at nagkukwento kung paano inabot sa kanya ni Night iyong notes at
assignments. "Kailan kaya sila maghihiwalay ni Laurie?"

Napasimangot naman ako. Hindi kasi ako pabor sa mga tao na hinihiling na maghiwalay ang isang couple dahil lang sa pansariling kagustuhan... Darating din ang para sa 'yo; you need not wish harm on others.

"Hay, anyway, babalik na raw si Avo bukas."

I smiled. Tomorrow, I'd see the handsome devil again.

Kinabukasan, maaga akong nagising. Mabilis akong naligo at nagsuot ng uniform namin. Pati sa uniform ko, cautious na ako. Hindi ko naman kasi alam kung saan na ako biglang aatakihin. Kung nagawa nga nilang lasunin ang pagkain ko, ano pa ang pumipigil sa kanila na baka kahit uniform ko, lagyan ng kung ano.

I just really wish na mahuli na kung sino ang gumagawa nito... Ayoko naman na mabuhay na palagi na lang nakabantay sa likod ko. This was the very reason why I abhor the life I grew up with. The constant danger and threats were maddening.

Pag hakbang na pag hakbang ko pa lang sa labas ng dorm namin, nakita ko na agad siya.

"Hi."

His hands were inside his pockets and he was looking at me like I was the best damn thing in the world. Nakangiti ako habang naglalakad papunta sa kanya. Ilang araw ko lang siyang hindi nakita pero pakiramdam ko, miss na miss ko na siya.

Maybe he was right... Time isn't measurement enough when it comes to love.

"Hi," sagot ko rin sa kanya. "Umitim ka."

Kumunot naman ang noo niya. "Does it bother you?" parang nag-aalala na sagot niya. Gusto ko naman na matawa. Para bang ang importante ng opinyon ko sa kanya. And that made my stomach do a little somersault.

Umiling ako. "Kumain ka na ba?" I asked to deviate the topic. Hindi naman talaga siya umitim, pero nagkaroon siya ng kulay. Masyado kasing maputi itong lalaki na 'to. He was almost pale. He looked nice—with colors in his cheeks. Nakakabuti pala sa kanya na lumalabas... But I really didn't dig the idea of him out while it was the most dangerous time in our world.

Gusto ni Avo na sa restaurant kami kumain pero umiling ako. Baka kasi magtaka siya kapag hindi ako makakain dahil sa paglason na naganap. Instead, sinabi ko sa kanya na bumili na lang kami ng pagkain sa convenience store. Hindi naman siguro nalason ang mga pagkain dun... Grabe naman kung pati iyon ginawa nila para lang mamatay ako.

In the end, napilit ko rin siya. We bought sandwich and we ate it while we were sitting on one of the benches.

"Did you miss me?" he asked. Muntik na akong mabulunan sa kanya. Ano ba namang tao 'to! Inabutan niya ako ng tubig at saka hinagod ang likuran ko. "Are you alright?"

Tumango ako matapos kong maubos iyong tubig. Tinitigan niya ang mukha ko.

"A-ano?" sabi ko dahil naiilang ako sa pagtingin niya sa akin. It was like I was a specimen under his microscopic eyes. Nakakailang.

Kumunot ang noo niya. "You look thinner. And paler. What happened while I was away?"

As if on cue, lumakas ang tibok ng dibdib ko. Tama nga si Night; mapapansin nga ni Avo. Pero kailangan kong galingang magsinungaling. Ayoko na mag-alala pa siya. Nandito na naman siya... sigurado ako na safe na ako. He was my safety blanket. He made me feel secured.

Umiling ako. "Wala naman."

"You sure?"

"Namiss lang kita kaya hindi ako makakain kaya siguro pumayat ako," I said. Parang gusto kong sabunin ang bibig ko sa mga salita na lumabas mula rito. God! Kailan pa ako natuto ng mga ganyang salita? I must be so desperate to draw him away from any speculations for me to say such words.

Agad naman na inilagay ni Avo ang kamay niya sa pisngi ko. "I'm here now, alright?" he said and I was hypnotized.

Matapos naming kumain ay dumiretso na kami sa room namin. The room was chaotic as usual. Nung pumasok kami, wala namang nagbago. Nakita ko na nandun na si Night sa pwesto niya kaya pakiramdam ko, nakausap niya na ang mga classmates namin na 'wag ipaalam kay Avo na dalawang araw akong absent.

As we sat down, nagsimula ng mag-usap sina Night at Avo. Kakadating lang pala kasi talaga ni Avo mula sa labas. At ako agad ang pinuntahan niya. My heart fluttered.

"Did anything happen while I was away?" he asked Night.

Night closed the book he was reading. "Nothing. Binantayan ko si Boe as you asked." Kaya naman pala palagi siyang nakasunod sa akin. Minsan nga, naaawa na ako kay Laurie... Ayaw ko naman na agawan siya ng atensyon ni Night. Minsan nga sinabi ko na na okay lang ako at puntahan niya si Laurie pero ayaw niyang pumayag. Si Night talaga 'yung tao na loyal at may isang salita. I'd bet that his loyalty to Avo wouldn't waver.

Tumango naman si Avo. Dumating na ang professor namin at nagsimula na kami na mag-aral. Pero sa kalagitnaan ng lecture ay biglang nagkaroon ng announcement.

Attention to the students of Academia de Mondragon: this Friday night, the annual welcoming of the new students will be held in the auditorium. The same rules apply: the old students would have to wear black and a mask and the new students would be dressed in white. Attendance is mandatory.

Isang beses pa na inulit iyong announcement. Mabuti na lang at halos patapos na rin iyong lecture namin. Agad akong nagtanong kay Avo tungkol sa welcoming na tinutukoy sa announcement.

"Ano ba 'yun?" tanong ko sa kanya. Ayaw niya kasi akong sagutin. Mas lalo tuloy akong na-curious. Since ayaw naman akong pansinin ni Avo, bumaling ako kay Night. "Ano 'yung welcoming na sinasabi, Night?"

"Don't bother, wife. You won't be attending," sabi ni Avo. Tumayo na kami at naglakad palabas. Nagmamadali ako dahil ang bilis nila maglakad dalawa. Si Night, humiwalay ng landas. Mukhang papunta siya sa building nila Laurie... Mabuti naman. Palagi na lang kasi ako ang inaasikaso ni Night, e.

"Ano ba kasi 'yun, Avo?" I was incessant on asking. Mas lalo na hindi sinasabi sa akin, mas lalo kong gugustuhin na malaman.

Kanina ko pa siya kinukulit. Paulit-ulit ko siyang tinatanong, pakiramdam ko nga naiinis na siya sa akin, e. Pero kasi habang mas ayaw niyang sabihin, mas magpupumilit ako. Kaya dapat talaga sabihin niya na lang.

Finally, he stopped from his tracks.

"It's a tradition in this school," sabi niya.

"Oh, tradition naman pala. Bakit ayaw mo akong papuntahin?" I asked him.

Tinignan niya ako nang mabuti at saka nagbuntong hininga. "You don't understand."

"E 'di ipaintindi mo sa akin," I said, half-annoyed. Ayoko sa lahat e 'yung may tinatago sa akin e obvious naman na. Para akong pinagmumukhang tanga.

He sighed. "It's the night when the *Dieux* will choose the *Quatrième* that they will enslave."

Kumunot ang noo ko. "You do that?" hindi makapaniwalang sabi ko. Hindi ko maintindihan ang sarili ko. Alam ko na baka nakapatay na ng

tao si Avo... na possible naman na may binubully siya... But I always try to believe in the goodness in each person. And being slapped hard by the reality stings.

"Why?" mahina ang boses na sabi ko. I tried to mask the disappointment in my voice but I couldn't. Iniisip ko pa lang na may tao silang pinapahirapan, naiinis na ako. Isipin mo, isa ka lang tapos pagtutulungan ka ng lahat ng Dieux? Paano naman 'yun?

"It's tradition," he answered.

Hindi na ako sumagot. Para akong binuhusan ng malamig na tubig. All this time, I was just fooling myself na mabuting tao si Avo. He wasn't the person I imagined him to be. He's just like the monsters my mom told me about.

"Hindi ba pwede na 'wag mo ng gawin 'yun?" I asked him but I was met with stony silence.

"Don't go, alright?" Instead he said.

I looked at him. "Why? Because you don't want me to see the horrible person that you really are?" Hindi ko alam kung saan ko nakuha ang lakas ng loob na sabihin iyon sa kanya. But I really couldn't deal with what I just discovered. Why the need to enslave someone? What good do you get from that?

"Wife..."

I stopped from my tracks. "What?"

"Are you mad at me?"

I shook my head. "Do I have the right to be mad at you?" I said and then looked at him with dead eyes. "I'm just one of your puppets."

Chapitre Neuf

Kanina pa ako hindi mapakali. I wanted to come… but at the same time, I didn't want to. I didn't want to see Avo being cruel to someone first hand. I was afraid that whatever I see, it would change something between us. Because despite the fact that I was a part of this world—this crazy, stupid, bloody world—I had never once embraced the fact. I didn't like the killings. I didn't enjoy the gore. If I could change one thing in my life, I couldn't… because I would want to change everything.

I wanted to have a normal life. I wanted to live a normal life. But my life was anything but normal.

"Hindi ka pupunta?" Cathy asked. She was already dressed up. Hindi ko maintindihan kung bakit kailangan pa niyang magbihis ng maganda. She would just watch somebody get enslaved by the Dieux. I didn't think it was a black tie occasion.

I couldn't give her an answer. Ayaw ni Avo na pumunta ako… At ayaw ko rin naman. But a part of me wanted to come.

"Ano ba ang meron 'dun?" I asked again. Maybe it wasn't that bad. Maybe I just assumed the worst. Palibhasa kasi ay alam ko na tiga-pagmana si Avo ng Mafia, iba na agad iyong naiisip ko sa kanya.

She shrugged and combed her already perfected hair. "Usual lang."

I looked at her with my forehead in crease. She sighed when she saw

me.

"Oops. I forgot na newbie ka nga pala dito," she said and then she sat down beside me. "Anyway, yearly kasi, may ginagawang slave iyong mga *Dieux* mula sa mga *Quatrième*."

"Necessary ba 'yun?" I asked.

She nodded.

"Bakit? Bakit kailangan pa nila na gawing slaves iyong mga *Quatrième*? Hindi ba pare-pareho lang naman tayo na estudyante dito?" I said, exasperated. This hierarchy system was eating me inside out. Bakit ba kailangan pang gawin iyon? Ano ba ang mapapala nila? Did it give them joy to see someone suffering? Ganitong uri ba talaga ng mga tao ang nasa mundo na ginagalawan ko?

Cathy smiled and then combed my hair.

"Boe, my dear Boe," she cooed. "Your naivety is refreshing pero kailangan nating tanggalin 'yan, okay? In the world we live in, the innocent ones get to die first. The more trusting you are, the more you are putting your life at risk."

"But you? Hindi rin kita pwedeng pagkatiwalaan?"

Cathy smiled.

"You can… but I'd rather you won't. Mas mabuti kasi na wala kang pagkaka-tiwalaan ng sobra. Because when you put your trust in someone, you give them the power to hurt you."

And this reminded me that even though Cathy had been good to me, isa pa rin siyang tao na lumaki sa mundo na 'to. Maybe like me, she had seen death countless of times. And going through that would make you lose trust in humanity altogether. It was still a wonder kung paano ko nagagawang makipagkaibigan. Because I had seen more death that it made me wonder if life was still worth living. Na kahit ano'ng paghihirap at pagsusumikap ang gawin mo, one wrong move and you'd end up dead.

That you'd always have to measure your every move dahil kapag hindi nagustuhan ng mas mataas sa 'yo, it's so easy to pull the trigger.

"But if you don't want to come, it's fine. Just pretend that you're down with something, okay? 'Di ka naman mapipilit pumunta kung may sakit ka," she said.

Naka-alis na si Cathy pero ako, nag-iisip pa rin kung ano ang gagawin ko. It wasn't as if I had much of a choice. Para kasing isang malaking kulungan itong *AdM*. Walang internet, hindi pwedeng tumawag sa labas. Wala akong masyadong pwedeng gawin... And since attendance was mandatory for that tradition, malamang lahat ng tao ay nasa auditorium din mamaya.

Mula sa kwarto namin, naririnig ko iyong nangyayari sa auditorium. Sobrang ingay ba nila para marinig ko hanggang dito? Kasi ang layo na ng dorm sa mismong school, e. Pero dahil na rin sa ingay, napagdesisyunan ko na umalis. I quickly grabbed a jacket and covered myself up. Malamig kasi sa *AdM* kapag gabi
dahil maraming puno sa school.

I passed by the auditorium but I fought the urge to go inside. I didn't want to see whatever was happening. If Avo was being mean to someone, I didn't want to see it. I'd rather remain clueless than to see the reality. Dumiretso ako sa shooting range. Naisip ko na magpractice na lang para naman hindi na ako pag-initan ng prof namin sa klase. Kahit naman kasi naturuan na ako ni Avo, it was just enough for me not to look foolish during the diagnostic exam. And I knew that my mediocre shooting skill wouldn't suffice once na magkaroon na kami ng exams.

"Stupid, stupid school," I kept on uttering to myself as I shoot the target. "I asked to attend a school pero dito ako napunta. How specific should I be para maintindihan ako ng parents ko?" And another shot, this time closer to the middle. "I'd rather attend a normal school and be followed by guards around kaysa dito sa school na 'to."

And I fired and fired and fired hanggang sa maubusan na ako ng bala. I was panting real hard when I was done. I was freaking frustrated!

"This school isn't so bad."

Agad akong napahawak sa dibdib ko nung may magsalita sa likuran

ko.

"Night!" I said nung makita ko siya sa likuran ko. He was holding a gun, too. "Kanina ka pa?"

Umiling siya.

"Just arrived," he said and then wore ear muffs. He cocked the gun and then in a split second, he began firing. He didn't even have to aim. Bigla na lang siyang bumaril. Ilang segundo bago siya natapos and when he was done, he got the target paper.

Isa lang iyong butas. He was really good at aiming!

"Ang galing mo!" I said in awe.

"Avo's a better shooter," he replied. "What are you doing here, anyway?"

I shrugged. "Bawal daw akong pumunta sabi ni Avo," I said, instead. Ayokong sabihin na ayokong pumunta dahil ayoko silang makita na inaapi iyong mga *Quatrième*. "Tapos na ba?"

He nodded and then removed the magazine from the gun.

"Ano'ng nangyari?"

"Nothing," he said as he was putting bullets in the magazine.

"Nothing?"

"Yeah… It was boring."

I wanted to ask more but Night was the kind of person na magsasabi kung gusto niyang magsalita. And though we weren't close yet, ramdam ko na ayaw niyang makipag-usap ngayon. I had no idea what transpired tonight but I figured he needed space so I quickly exited. Mukhang problemado si Night. Tungkol kaya kay Laurie? Hindi ko kasi siya masyadong nakikita lately.

But before I could even take a step away, nagsalita ulit si Night.

"Boe," he said and I stopped on my track. "You won't tell Avo anything, right?"

I nodded.

"Good."

Iyon lang tapos umalis na ako. Hindi ko alam kung bakit sobrang

importante na hindi ko sabihin kay Avo kung ano iyong nangyari pero baka nga para sa mas makakabuti iyon... Though I also wanted to know who wanted to hurt me. Hindi na siya nakuntento nung halos patayin niya ako sa sobrang lamig, kinailangan niya pa akong lasunin. Whoever that person was, he or she was persistent. And good, also. Ni hindi nahagip ng camera iyong mukha. Puro likod lang ang nakuhanan kaya **wala rin kaming clue kung sinuman iyon.**

Paglabas ko, bigla akong nakaramdam ng gutom dahil nakakapagod din pala na bumaril. Dumiretso ako sa convenience store dahil medyo nawalan ako ng tiwala sa mga pagkain sa resto. Malay ko ba kung may access pala iyong gustong pumatay sa akin sa mga pagkain? At least sa convenience store, random ang kakainin ko. Mas mababa ang **probability na malason ako.**

As I was walking toward the convenience store, someone tugged my arm.

"Avo."

He was looking at me. Hindi siya nagsasalita.

"Tell me what to do," he said. I couldn't read his eyes... And maybe I couldn't. At all. Mas madalas pa na hindi ko maintindihan si Avo. He's too deep and he's not giving away anything. Kung hindi niya sasabihin, hindi ko malalaman. He's too enclosed. And sometimes, too cold. But **he's something else.**

He's something that managed to pull me close every single time.

"Ha?"

"I don't want you mad at me."

Hindi ako naka-sagot. Why was he so afraid of me?

"I'm not mad... Just disappointed."

"And that's even worse."

"How is that worse?"

He was still looking at me with those eyes. Nakaka-lunod.

"If you're mad, it means I did something to upset you. But if you're disappointed, it means I didn't live up to your expectations. It

means I failed. And I don't fail, Boe. I don't do failures. Much more when it's related to you."

Napa-awang iyong labi ko sa mga sinabi niya. Was my opinion of him that important? Ano ba ang meron sa akin para maging ganito ako ka-importante sa kanya?

"Avo..."

Naka-tingin lang siya sa akin, but the worry in his eyes was very visible. The entire population was afraid of him... but he was afraid of me. Nakaka-tawa.

"It's okay," I said. "Just... don't do it in front of me. Ayokong makita kung anuman ang gagawin mo sa *Quatrième* na mapipili mo," I explained. Hindi ko talaga kaya kapag pinahirapan nila kung sinuman ang mapili nila.

"I promise I won't harm her."

Napa-tingin ako agad.

"Her?"

He nodded.

"Maganda ba?"

Kumunot ang noo niya.

"What?"

"Is she pretty?"

"I don't know."

"Ano'ng you don't know? Maganda ba? Ha? Bakit sa lahat ng *Quatrième*, siya ang napili mo? Wala bang lalaki?" sunud-sunod na tanong ko. Sino ba ang babae na 'yun para siya pa ang mapili? Ang alam ko madaming scholar sa *AdM*, e! What's so special about her para siya pa ang piliin ni Avo?

Naka-kunot ang noo ni Avo na para bang hindi niya maintindihan kung bakit ako nagkaka-ganito. Siya nga dyan na pati kaibigan niya ay pinagseselosan, tapos hindi niya alam kung bakit ako ganito? He's just so weird!

"I wouldn't feel comfortable leaving a guy with you," he explained.

"What?"

"I'd be gone for days at a time. My family needs me," he explained. Naalala ko na naman iyong sinabi ni Night na na-kidnap iyong Ate ni Avo. "When I'm gone she'll assist you and look after you. That's her only task."

And it was my turn to have my forehead in crease.

"Ha?"

Avo held my hand. And then pulled me close and hugged me. His body relaxed when I returned his embrace. I loved it when he's this close. Nararamdaman ko iyong bawat tibok ng puso niya and it put me at ease. I knew he'd protect me. He's crazy and weird but I knew he's true. Kahit na sobrang bilis ng pangyayari at hindi ko pa rin naiintindihan kung bakit at papaano, I knew I could trust him.

And he's the only one I trust my life with. I could trust him. I could feel it.

"She only needs to make sure that you're okay. That's her only task."

Napa-ngiti ako.

"Thank you." I whispered and tightened the hug. "This means a lot to me, Avo."

That's there's still a shed of hope left. That the blood flowing inside his veins wasn't straight up cold.

He cupped my face and said, "So you better make sure that you won't be harmed, Boe, because I'd have her life once something bad happens to you."

He was gently caressing my face with his fingers but my body shuddered with fear. Because it was clear that whoever would be looking after me would die once anything unfortunate befalls onto me. And this was so fucking bad because someone's already after me.

Chapitre Dix

Oh, my god. Why was this happening to me? Bakit sa lahat ng babae na magbabantay sa akin, kailangan na si Laurie pa? Ano bang kamalasan ang mayroon ako para mangyari ito? Wasn't it enough that my life was in a constant state of danger tapos pati ito, dadagdag pa? And why was Laurie even chosen? She wasn't a *Quatrième*! She was a *Deuxième*!

I wanted to ask her why, but at the same time, I was scared.

"What's your schedule for today?" Laurie asked.

Hindi agad ako makasagot. She gave me chills. Kahit na mukhang mabait naman siya dahil girlfriend siya ni Night, there was something about her that was scary… Para bang siya ang babaeng version ni Avo.

"Ah… classes lang," I meekly replied.

Laurie checked something on her iPad tapos makalipas ang ilang segundo, pinatay niya rin iyon tapos inayos niya na iyong mga gamit. Tumayo na rin ako dahil magsisimula na iyong klase ko pero nagulat ako nung mapansin ko na sinusundan ako ni Laurie.

"Wala kang class?" I asked because she kept on following me.

"Meron," she replied.

"Uhm… hindi ka papasok?"

She shook her head.

"Hala, bakit?"

Kumunot ang noo niya na para bang napaka-walang kwenta ng tanong ko sa kanya. Concerned lang naman ako dahil kahit naman kakaiba ang mundo na ginagalawan namin, alam ko naman na importante ang pag-aaral. And that's one of the reasons why I was slowly starting to appreciate—if not like—*AdM*... Kasi kahit na maraming kakaibang ginagawa, hindi ko naman maitatanggi na maganda talaga ang academics nila.

"I'm your slave," she answered in an as a matter of fact tone. And that was enough for me to drop the topic. She gave me the shudder, still.

Dumiretso na ako sa unang klase ko sa araw na iyon. Tuwing umaga kasi iyong mga related sa tunay na degree na kinukuha naming. Tapos sa hapon naman, iyong mga kakailanganin naming malaman para maka-survive kami sa mundo na ginagalawan namin. And true to what Cathy said before, I was slowly starting to enjoy the lessons—especially the shooting parts. It was calming in a weird way.

Pagpasok sa classroom, dumiretso na ako sa upuan ko. Si Laurie naman ay doon sa likod ko naupo.

"Dito ka na lang," I told Laurie dahil bakante rin naman iyong katabi ko dahil wala si Avo.

She shook her head. Tumingin ako kay Night para sana humingi ng tulong tutal girlfriend niya naman si Laurie but Night just slumped his head on the table and pretended to be asleep. Hindi ko talaga maintidihan kung ano ang nangyayari! Ni hindi ko pa nga alam kung paano naging *Quatrième* bigla si Laurie, e. Tapos madadagdagan pa ng pagtataka ko kung bakit parang hindi na nag-uusap si Night at Laurie.

I wanted to talk to Night dahil gusto kong magtanong tungkol kay Avo pero hindi ko naman magawa. Nakaka-ilang kasi nandito si Laurie. Ayoko naman kasi na pag-isipan niya ako ng masama.

Pagdating ng lunch time, kasama ko pa rin si Laurie. Ganito ba buong sem? Magiging awkward ako dahil hindi ako palagay sa kasama ko?

"What do you want?" Laurie asked.

"Hindi, ako na," I said.

"Boe," she said. Napa-tingin ako agad sa kanya. "Just let me do what I have to do."

And that made me shut up.

Nung umalis si Laurie, agad akong naghanap ng mauupuan. Nakita ko si Night na kumakain mag-isa. Napansin ko lang na kapag wala si Avo, hindi rin magkakasama ang mga *Dieux*. Na para bang si Avo ang glue na nagdidikit sa kanilang lahat. And now that he's out, they're living in their own worlds.

"Night!" I said, smiling. "Pwede kami dito?"

He nodded.

"Bakit binibilisan mong kumain?" tanong ko nung mapansin ko na halos mabulunan na siya sa bilis ng pagkain na ginagawa niya. "Iniiwasan mo ba si Laurie?"

"No."

Tapos bigla siyang nabulunan kaya inabutan ko siya ng tubig.

"You're a great shooter but not a very good liar," I told Night as I watched him down his water. "Can I ask you something?"

Pero hindi pa man ako nakakapagsimula sa itatanong ko, para bang nabasa na ni Night ang sasabihin ko kaya naman naunahan niya na ako.

"Laurie's family was massacred."

Shit.

"She lost her *Deuxième* status that's why she's a *Quatrième* now," paliwanag ni Night.

"Oh, my god. Tapos iniiwasan mo pa siya?" I couldn't help but say. Laurie must be in a lot of pain right now tapos hindi pa siya kinakausap ni Night? Paano niya nagagawa iyon? "Night naman!"

"What?" Night said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Talk to her, be there for her! She needs you!"

Night put down his utensils at saka tinignan ako. And those orbs again reminded me that Night, although he seemed cool, was still a *Dieux*. And they had this certain aura around them... Na kahit si Lorenzo na pinaka-tahimik at mabait sa kanila ay nakakatakot din kapag

naging seryoso.

"You know what she needs? She needs to learn how to fend for herself. Now that her family's gone, she's alone. She needs to learn how to fight and she won't do that if she's around me all the time."

Napa-awang iyong labi ko sa sinabi ni Night.

"But you're her boyfriend..."

"I'm there for her. But I won't always be there."

Night looked at me. I knew he could see the disappointment in my eyes... Bakit hindi niya man lang bigyan ng panahon si Laurie? I was sure she was still mourning. If it were me, hindi ko alam kung kakayanin ko pa ba ulit.

"If you think that every guy is like Avo, you're mistaken. Not every guy is willing to die for a girl. Not me. At least not for her."

At saka niya ako iniwan. And I believed I just saw the real Night... with his pure and unadulterated thoughts. And it didn't even scare me a bit.

Hindi ako maka-tingin kay Laurie. Hindi ako maka-tingin sa kanya ng hindi ko naiisip iyong mga sinabi ni Night... I mean, I knew he was right. In some points. Na totoo naman talaga na kailangan ni Laurie na matuto na tumayo sa sarili niyang mga paa lalo na ngayon at wala na pala ang pamilya niya. But should she do that abruptly? Couldn't she mourn first and be strong later? Kailangan ba na parati na lang tayong malakas?

Tutusukin ko na sana iyong pagkain ko nung biglang kunin ni Laurie sa akin.

"Bakit?" I asked.

"I'll taste it first."

"Ha?"

"If this is poisoned, Avo will kill me," she said. *"Though that would be a better choice,"* narinig ko na bulong niya. And my heart sank for this

girl again. Mas lalo lang tuloy ako nainis kay Night kahit na alam ko na wala naman akong pakielam dapat dahil buhay niya iyon.

Nung masigurado ni Laurie na safe iyong pagkain, tahimik na lang akong kumain. I figured that though I couldn't directly talk to Laurie about how she was, ang gagawin ko na lang ay magiging mabait ako para naman hindi ko na siya bigyan ng sakit ng ulo. That's the least I could do for her.

And… I didn't want her dead. Alam ko na seryoso si Avo. I could feel it. I didn't want Laurie's blood on my hands. I wanted her to live. I wanted her to heal. Alam ko kasi iyong pakiramdam ng mawalan and sometimes, it feels like you're better off dead, too. Kasi mawawalan ka ng dahilan para magpatuloy pa. And I wasn't about to give her that. She needed to live. Not for Night, not for anyone, but for herself.

Kaya naman pagkatapos noon, hindi ko na siya tinanong ng kung anu-ano kahit na marami akong gustong itanong. I'd just look out for myself para na rin sa kanya.

At para na rin sa ika-tatahimik ng pagkatao ni Avo.

"Good job, Miss Estrella," bati sa akin nung firing coach. I stifled the smile on my face—I tried, so hard, but I couldn't. Sobrang proud lang kasi ako sa sarili ko dahil for the first time since Avo taught me how to fire a gun, naka-tama na
ako sa pinaka-sentro. If this wasn't a moment worth celebrating, I wouldn't know what is.

Pabalik na sana ako sa pwesto kung saan nandun si Laurie pero wala na siya doon.

"Laurie?" I called out her name pero walang sumasagot. It was weird. Nandun pa rin naman iyong gamit niya sa upuan.

Ibinaba ko muna iyong gamit ko at saka hinanap siya. Ito ang mahirap sa walang phone dito sa school, e. Ang hirap hanapin ng mga tao. Tapos kagaya nung nangyari sa akin dati, halos mamatay na ako sa sobrang lamig pero ni wala akong mahingan ng tulong dahil wala akong matawagan.

Paikot-ikot lang ako sa area dahil alam ko naman na hindi ako iiwan ni Laurie mag-isa. She made it clear that she'd look after me kaya malabo talaga na bigla na lang siyang mawawala. Papasok na sana ako sa elevator para i-check iyong second floor nung may marinig akong ingay mula sa isang kwarto.

"What? Can't talk now? Nawalan ng boses? Huh?"

I took another step closer.

"You acted all high and mighty because you're with Night tapos ngayon, you're what? The chosen slave for the sem?"

At nakarinig ako ng mga tawanan.

"Ano? Salita! Ang yabang-yabang mo noon lalo na sa mga *Deuxième* na kagaya namin! Like you're better than us dahil lang girlfriend ka ni Night! Well guess what? We're now better than you, you filthy *Quatrième*!"

At may narinig akong bumagsak. Biglang bumilis ang tibok ng puso ko at bumilis ang lakad ko. Shit! Ano'ng nangyayari?! Agad kong binuksan iyong pintuan at nagulat ako nung may hawak sila na baseball bat at ipapalo kay Laurie. I didn't know what happened. I didn't know if I was even thinking nung bigla na lang akong tumakbo at saka hinarang iyong katawan ko sa harap ni Laurie.

"Shit!"

Biglang nagdilim iyong paningin ko. My head was throbbing so badly.

"Oh, my god."

Hinawakan ko iyong ulo ko at may nakita akong dugo.

"Why the fuck did you do that!" sabi ni Laurie sa tabi ko.

I was trying to breathe but my head was pounding and my eyes were betraying me.

"I'm… s-sorry…" I whispered. I didn't mean to harm myself. Natakot lang ako nung makita ko na papaluin siya nung mga babae.

"You stupid girl! I'm not even worth protecting!" sabi niya. I could see the worry in her eyes.

"I-I'll t-talk to A-avo…" I promised. I wouldn't let him hurt her.

"That's not what I'm worried about, idiot! Paano kung may mangyari sa 'yo?!" sabi niya at saka tinignan iyong mga babae. "You see what you did?! She's Avo's girlfriend!"

Hindi ko alam iyong mga sumunod na nangyari. I felt really sleepy, but I heard voices.

"Night! Help us! Si Boe!"

I wouldn't die. I knew that. I still had lots to do in this world. But… dying didn't sound so bad.

"Who did this?"

Why was it that even in my sleepy state, ang lamig pa rin ng boses niya?

"We're not doing anything wrong. We're in the same level! We're all *Deuxième*!"

Why wasn't it wrong? Kailan pa naging tama na manakit ng kapwa?

"Ah, I see."

That cold voice again.

"So you're saying that if I kill you, it won't be wrong since I'm above you?"

And then there was shiver in my spine.

"B-bakit mo 'yun gagawin? Laurie's not your girlfriend anymore!"

And then silence.

"I know."

And then I felt fear embrace the room.

"But you don't mess with the people close to me."

And then shots were fired.

Chapitre Onze

My breathing stopped. My vision swirled. My system couldn't stomach the sight in front of me. Umaagos iyong dugo mula sa gitna ng noo nila. The eyes still wide open. Siguro dahil hindi nila akalain na gagawin ni Night… Kasi ganoon din ako. I couldn't believe it. I didn't want to believe that he was capable of murder but this happened.

They're dead.

Iyong kanina lang na sinisigawan kami, wala na sila ngayon. Iyong kanina lang na gumagalaw, patay na sila. And it happened right before my eyes. I saw Night kill these girls right before me.

I couldn't breathe.

"Are you alright?" tanong sa akin ni Laurie. "Boe."

My chest was tightening. God, I couldn't breathe.

"Night, she's not moving! Let's bring her to the clinic!"

My eyes were focused on the girls in front of me. Their eyes looking at me. Na para bang ako ang huli nilang nakita nung binawian sila ng buhay. That somehow… though I was not the one who pulled the trigger, I was the one responsible for the lives lost.

Binaba ni Night iyong baril at saka humarap sa akin. He kneeled in front of me and looked me straight in the eye.

"Listen to me."

My head was in a buzz but his voice demanded attention kaya napatingin ako sa kanya. All this time, I thought that it was Avo who was ruthless but I was wrong. Avo will tell you if he'd kill you. He would give you warning... But Night? Night was another level. He seemed harmless but he wasn't. He's calm but he can kill. He'd pull the trigger without even blinking. He's a walking contradiction and that made him even more dangerous.

"Do you want more blood spilled around here?"

I slowly shook my head.

"Good. So, let's not tell Avo about this, alright? Because if we do, he'd kill Laurie. Sayang naman 'yung pagkamatay nila," sabi niya sabay turo nung baril sa mga babaeng nakahiga. Tinignan niya si Laurie. "I'll bring her to the clinic. Call Lorenzo and tell him I asked him to clean up this mess."

Without so much a word, he scooped me up and began walking. I couldn't even will myself to touch him. He was scaring me.

Pagdating namin sa clinic, agad kaming sinalubong ng doctor. She must be thinking that I was such a klutz. Sa loob ng ilang linggo, ilang beses na rin akong nandito sa clinic. Baka sa susunod, sobra na iyong mangyari sa akin.

"Miss Estrella," sabi niya. "What happened?"

Hindi ako makapagsalita. Was I supposed to tell anything? It felt like I was walking on thin ice.

"I fell down the stairs," I lied. She didn't ask for more questions, siguro dahil na rin sa presensya ni Night sa tabi ko. Sinimulang linisin iyong sugat. I needed stitches because of the gash but it didn't seem like much compared to what the girls suffered. Bakit ba kasi nandun si Night? We could've handled it better. Wala sanang namatay.

Nung matapos na iyong paggamot sa akin, binigyan lang ako ng gamot nung doctor. I was advised to rest for the entire day. Pumayag na rin ako dahil nahihilo ako. And I wanted to rest.

"Kaya ko na," I said nung sinubukan akong alalayan ni Night. He was

trying to hold me but I felt burned every time he'd try to touch me. Gone was the comforting feeling I had with him. All that was left was indifference. I wanted nothing to do with him anymore.

Sinubukan kong maglakad mag-isa kahit na sa totoo lang, nahihilo ako. The dorm was still a bit far from the clinic but I could manage. I knew I could do it all by myself. I practically grew up alone. I was basically separated from my family. Sanay naman akong mag-isa. But as I was walking, I could feel Night trailing behind me.

"I don't care if you avoid me. Just don't get in trouble," I heard him say. I kept silent. I kept on walking until we reached the dorm. I opened the door and then looked at him.

"I'll try my best not to get in trouble… But I want nothing to do with you."

And then I slammed the door. God, where's Avo when I needed him?

Days passed and Avo still hadn't come back. Seryoso pala talaga siya nung sinabi niya na matagal siyang mawawala kaya kailangan niya si Laurie para bantayan ako. Hindi ko naman akalain na sobrang tagal pala… O baka naman natatagalan lang ako dahil wala akong makausap? Cathy wasn't in my classes and I was avoiding Night like a plague. Si Laurie naman, still, hindi ko makausap nang matino dahil… ewan. I just couldn't.

I was starting to be in dire need of friends.

Pagkatapos ng third class ko, dumiretso na ako—I mean kami ni Laurie sa cafeteria para kumain. She still tasted my food first before giving it to me. Pinapabayaan ko na rin talaga siya dahil ayoko na may mangyari na naman na masama. It had already been a few days of silence and I wanted to continue that. Hanggang makabalik sana si Avo dahil kapag kasama ko si Avo, wala namang nangyayaring masama sa akin.

Siguro dahil natatakot sila kay Avo.

While Laurie was buying our food, nakita ko si Lorenzo na nakaupo. He was eating alone and reading something. Nilapitan ko siya.

"Hi," I said. He looked at me. "Can I sit with you?"

He shrugged.

"Okay lang?"

"It's alright," he said. Mababa pala ang boses niya. Ngayon ko lang kasi siya nakausap. He had always been the silent one—iyong literal na tahimik. Iyong iba kasi sa *Dieux*, mukha lang tahimik dahil misteryoso pero nagsasalita sila. Si Lorenzo kasi, hindi talaga nagsasalita.

"Thanks," I replied. "It's just that… wala akong makausap. Sana okay lang sa 'yo."

"It's fine. Just don't be noisy. I hate noise."

"But you're in the cafeteria. It's noisy here," I pointed out.

"Alam ko. I just don't like people talking to me when it's irrelevant."

"Oh… sige, 'di na ako magsasalita," I said and then began embracing the silence with him. I just needed someone to be with other than Laurie, because not talking to her was almost driving me mad.

"Are you with someone? Because you're already making me uncomfortable. I don't like another," sabi niya.

"It's just Laurie," sabi ko. Kilala niya naman si Laurie dahil girlfriend—or ex, siguro—siya ni Night.

Nababa niya iyong libro.

"Oh. Her."

Kumunot ang noo ko dahil sa reaksyon ni Lorenzo.

"Why? Ayaw mo kay Laurie?"

He didn't say or do anything. I didn't push him to tell me anything dahil nga ayaw niya naman talagang magsalita. He just resumed reading his book. Pero ang tagal ni Laurie. Mahaba ba ang pila?

"Who do you think is more scary? Night or Avo?"

Binaba niya iyong libro at tinignan ako.

"Both," he replied. "They'd kill when needed. I will kill if needed."

Bigla akong natawa. Hindi kasi bagay sa kanya.

"Don't you think I can kill?"

Pinigilan kong tumawa kaya kinagat ko na lang iyong ibabang labi ko pero iyong ngiti ko, nandun pa rin.

"No... it's just that, among all the Dieux, ikaw iyong parang pinaka-mabait..." I said with a smile.

"People, when triggered, will kill anyone who threatens them. It's a matter of survival. Even you," he said and then looked at me. "You're capable of killing someone."

The smile on my face faded. It was replaced with a stoic expression.

"No." It was firm. I was resolved to never engage in this kind of life. Na kahit ba pinanganak ako sa mundo na 'to, may karapatan pa rin ako na pumili ng kailangan kong gawin... Because my parents promised me that I wouldn't have to live this kind of life. They told me to wait... And that was what I had been doing all this time. I was waiting... and waiting... and waiting. And I wished I didn't have to wait anymore because things had been happening. And I was afraid that it would change me.

"If someone points a gun in your face, you'd just let them kill you?"

"Why does it have to go that way? What happened to talking?" I countered.

"Because it's human nature, Estrella. It goes down to the basic instinct of people to want to survive. That in the face of danger, you'd do anything to save yourself. So don't act clean because given the chance, you'd also pull the trigger."

And someone should remind me why I went and talked with him?

"I won't kill anyone."

He picked up the book.

"Then you'd end up dead. And you shouldn't die. You can't die."

Napa-tingin ako sa kanya. It was the same thing Night kept on telling me... Na hindi dapat ako mamatay. Na para bang hindi ako pwedeng mamatay dahil may mangyayari... What was so important that my life mattered that much? Alam ba nila? Alam ba nila na kagaya din nila ako?

But... how? They couldn't know about me. Even the world didn't know about my existence.

"Because if you die, everyone dies."

"...bakit?"

I dared ask. Even though I was scared.

"Because we're playing our own game of chess. And here, if the Queen falls down, so does everyone else."

He looked at me.

"So, don't die. Don't even think about dying."

Tapos bigla niyang isinara iyong libro nung makita niya na paparating na si Laurie.

"Be nice to her. Her Uncle took over the family business, leaving her with nothing," sabi niya bago tuluyang umalis.

Pagdating ni Laurie, tulala lang ako at hindi makakain. Ano ang ibig niyang sabihin? Ano ba ang kinalaman ko sa mga nangyayari? I didn't want to meddle with the business. I didn't want to kill people and I wasn't about to start now. I just wanted a normal life pero hindi ba talaga pwede? Why was death following me around like it's no one's business?

"Boe."

I was pulled from my thoughts when Laurie spoke.

"Put your hair down. Avo will be returning later. He shouldn't notice the scar."

My heart stopped. Finally, he's back.

Chapitre Douze

If I could pull time to make it run faster, I would. I wanted to see Avo. I wanted him beside me because when he's with me, nothing happens… And I wanted nothing but that. I had seen too much death. I had seen too much blood shed in the light of protecting me. Tama na. I didn't need a pile of corpse trailing me.

Laurie said that Avo would arrive any minute now and I wanted nothing but to be finished with this class para makita ko na si Avo. But the class was just starting and I had an hour and a half to endure.

"Today is the first day of our practical exam," the prof announced. There were murmurs. Some were excited, some were dreading the idea like me. Iyon kasing klase namin ay tungkol sa self-defense kaya naman hindi ako excited sa exam na magaganap. Being someone new in this school, I was lacking in almost all aspect. Iyong mga kaklase ko ay ilang taon na dito sa *AdM* kaya naman sanay na sila sa mga ganito… But me? I hadn't even experienced punching anyone, much less doing self-defense.

"As per school rules, you shall only engage with someone in the same level as you. And since this is the first practical, you are given the liberty to choose your partner."

And the hunt began. Nagsimula na silang maghanap ng makaka-

pares.

"I can't," Laurie said when I looked at her. "I'm a *Quatrième* now."

And I shut my mouth. I didn't want to remind her of the tragedy that was her family. Hanggang ngayon, naiinis pa rin ako kapag naiisip ko iyong Uncle niya. Paano niya nagawa na patayin ang buong pamilya ni Laurie para lang makuha iyong negosyo nila? Whatever happened to humanity? Talaga bang nabubulag
ang tao kapag pera at kapangyarihan na ang usapan?

Tumayo ako at nagsimulang maghanap ng mga *Deuxième* na kagaya ko.

"Hi, pwede bang—"

Tinalikuran ako.

"Excuse me. I'm Boe—"

Tinalikuran ulit ako.

"No one will spar with you."

Napatingin ako sa gilid ko nang makita ko si Night.

"Don't talk to me," I said. Tuwing makikita ko kasi siya, ang naaalala ko ay kung paano niya pinatay iyong mga babaeng iyon ng walang patawad... He didn't even blink an eye. He didn't even feel any remorse. He didn't even think about what the family of those girls would feel... Talaga bang kapag miyembro ka ng Mafia ay hindi ka dapat makaramdam ng takot? Dahil ba mas mataas ka sa mga tao ay wala ka na dapat kinakatakutan?

"You can't avoid me."

I faced him.

"Watch me."

Tinalikuran ko siya at patuloy ako sa paghahanap ng makakapartner ko pero tuwing may lalapitan ako, ang makukuha ko lang ay tatalikuran ako o kaya naman ay may kapareha na sila.

"Wala akong partner..." I whispered to Laurie. Dapat kasi ay nandito si Cathy, e. Bakit ba kasi hindi kami magka-klase?

"They're scared," she said.

"Bakit? Hindi naman ako magaling. Sigurado na na panalo sila kapag ako ang kalaban nila..." Sa pagbaril pa nga lang ako medyo gumagaling dahil tinuturuan ako ni Avo, e. Ayaw kasi niya na pumayag na hindi ako marunong bumaril. And because of his constant nagging, I was able to aim and shoot properly. And when he came back, he promised that he would teach me how to fire at moving targets.

"Because you're Avo's girlfriend," sagot niya na parang naiinis pa siya sa akin dahil hindi ko alam iyon.

"But Avo's not even around!"

"He's everywhere. And everyone here knows that a *Dieux*'s word is not ought to be broken. If he says he'll kill anyone who harms you, he actually means it."

"But this is a self-defense class!" I cried. Normal lang naman na masaktan ako dito!

"Obviously," she said, almost rolling her eyes at me. "But do you think they'd risk their life?"

Napa-tahimik ako... The last one who dared ended up dead. Because of Night...

Siguro okay na nga rin na wala... Pero paano ako magkaka-roon ng grade kung wala akong partner?

"Sir, no one wants to be my partner," I said to the prof.

"No one here wants to be Miss Estrella's partner?" the prof asked the class. Parang may dumaan na anghel dahil sa sobrang katahimikan. I guess this showed how scared the students of *AdM* was of Avo. Na kahit wala siya, wala pa ring nagtatangka na bumali sa mga salita niya... And Cathy said that Avo's the scariest man in *AdM*... At kung natatakot na ako kay Night, hindi ko na alam kung ano pa ang dapat na maramdaman ko kay Avo.

But why wasn't I scared of him?

"Very well—"

"I'll do it."

Napatingin kaming lahat nung nagsalita si Ella.

"I'll fight her."

"But Miss Montrova—"

Tinignan niya iyong prof.

"What?"

Oh, God. She's scary, too.

Umiling iyong professor… Malamang ay natakot kay Ella.

"Miss Montrova and Miss Estrella will pair up for this practical," anunsyo ng prof.

Nagpaliwanag iyong prof tungkol sa mga dapat sundin habang ako, biglang kinabahan. Ella hated me… too much, alam ko. For her, inagaw ko si Avo kahit wala naman akong ginagawa. I couldn't blame her, too. Naaawa ako sa kanya… Para bang tinapon siya bigla ni Avo dahil sa akin… But still, why was she blaming me? Why not blame Avo for what he did? Bakit ba sa tuwing may maghihiwalay, iyong babae agad ang sinisisi? Na para bang walang nagawang masama iyong lalaki?

Why blame the innocent?

"She'll kill me," I whispered to myself. "She'll actually use this exam as an excuse to kill me."

I looked at Laurie.

"Help me here! Paano ko siya tatalunin?"

"I don't know. Ella's heavily trained," she replied. "Just fight her for a while and then purposely lose. Don't prolong the fight because she'll try to put a number on you."

Napa-ngiwi ako kapag naiisip ko pa lang kung paano ako sasaktan ni Ella. And I couldn't even cry foul dahil exam 'to! It was like the universe conspired to help Ella get her revenge on me! Dapat si Avo ang pagbuntungan niya ng galit at hindi ako! At nasaan na ba kasi si Avo? Did he know what will happen kaya nagpa-late siya? Dapat siya ang nasa pwesto ko!

Nagsimula na ang laban. Nauna iyong mga *Quatrième* at sinundan naman ng mga *Troisième*… At habang palapit nang palapit kami, pakiramdam ko ay masusuka ako sa sobrang kaba.

"Smith, Laurie and Clarkson, Jessa," pagtawag ng prof.

"Good luck," I mouthed and Laurie didn't even blink an eye. Minsan, iniisip ko na walang puso si Laurie... pero sigurado ako na meron dahil mahal niya si Night, e... Ang weird nilang dalawa.

"For the first round, Smith will be the attacker and Clarkson will do the defense," anunsyo ng prof.

Nagsimula na sila at napaawang iyong labi ko dahil walang kalaban-laban si Jessa sa atake ni Laurie! Tapos sa pangalawang round naman, ni hindi naka-porma si Jessa dahil agad na-depensahan ni Laurie iyong sarili niya.

"Ang galing mo pala!" I said in awe when Laurie came back to our place. Naging magkapareho na rin kasi ang schedule naming dalawa dahil kung hindi, mamimiss niya lahat ng klase niya. Apparently, this school did whatever the *Dieux* asked of them. At kapag napili ka na slave for the sem, literal na buong semester ka nilang uutusan.

"Stop clapping like a kid and start worrying."

"I already braced myself. Malamang sa clinic kami magkikita ni Avo dahil sasaktan ako ni Ella," I told her. I was already imaging the bruises and probably, some broken bones. Galit sa akin si Ella kaya malamang, kahit isang buto ay gugustuhin niya na balian ako... Mabuti na lang at walang balita na nakakarating sa labas dahil panigurado na magwawala ang 'My ko kapag nalaman niya iyong mga nangyayari sa akin sa school na 'to.

Napailing na lang si Laurie sa akin.

Lorenzo and a *Quatrième* fought and obviously, nanalo si Lorenzo... And then there was Night and Fuji.

"Are they fighting... for real?"

Tahimik lang si Laurie habang nakatingin kay Night. Pero para kasing iba iyong ginagawa nilang dalawa... It didn't feel like it was still a part of the test... Para bang personal na iyong ginagawang laban ni Night at Fuji.

Fuji punched Night. Night kicked Fuji. Akala ko ba self-defense… bakit parang wrestling na iyong pinapanood namin? And the prof couldn't even stop them because they're *Dieux*…

"You piece of shit!" Fuji hissed. He continued throwing punches but Night dodged one after another. And I confirmed. They're fighting. But why were they fighting? Hindi ko alam… hindi ko naman kasi nakakausap si Fuji dahil lalapit pa lang ako, parang gusto niya na akong sakalin… Kaya hindi na ako lumalapit.

But after a few punches and few kicks, Night finally pinned Fuji down. May binulong siya kay Fuji na hindi ko narinig but that was enough to make Fuji stop…

And then...

"Next," the prof said. "Montrova, Elliana and Estrella, Boe."

Oh, dear heavens.

Pumunta ako sa gitna, nanginginig iyong mga tuhod ko… Pakiramdam ko ay masusuka ako.

"I'll kill you," Ella hissed when she saw me. The people around us were whispering. Iyong mga *Dieux* ay tahimik na naka-masid sa amin. Nasaan ba kasi si Avo? I needed him now—before his ex murders me.

And then it began.

Ella tried throwing punches and I tried to avoid them like it costed me my life. But then, after seconds of avoiding her, she finally managed to kick me. Napa-higa ako dahil sa ginawa niya at saka siya naupo sa tiyan ko. She looked at me—those stares could not be mistaken… She hated me. So much.

"I hate you," she said. "It's your fault. You ruined everything! Kasalanan mo!"

And before she could even punch me in the face...

"Ella."

That voice. That authority.

"Get off of her. Don't make me mad.

Chapitre Treze

Agad na napatigil si Ella nung nagsalita si Avo. Lahat kami ay nakatingin sa kanya. This happened every time that he's around... His presence demanded attention. Kahit walang salita, pilit kang mapapasunod sa kanya.

"This is a test," Ella spat. She was still holding me by my shirt. "We're just doing our test... 'Di ba, Boe?" she said, looking at me.

I looked back at her and I could see the hatred in her eyes. God, she hated me so much. Gaano niya ba ka-mahal si Avo? He treated her like shit... Paano niya nagagawang mahalin pa rin ang isang tao na itinapon siya na para bang isa siyang basura? Like she didn't matter to him at all? Because if someone did that to me, that person is dead to me. I wasn't born to be treated like a trash. I value my pride as much as I value my life. No one gets to treat me like shit—not with my permission. If you don't like me, I don't like you, too.

"I concede," I said. "You win. I fail this round," I continued as I get off her. Tinignan ko iyong prof at mukhang naiintindihan niya iyong nangyari. I'd probably talk to him later so that I could take another test. I didn't want to fail this subject, but also, I didn't want to engage in a stupid fight with Ella.

But I wanted to fight her... so bad... but not like this. Not when she's

mad at me for all the wrong reasons. Siguro kapag may sapat na akong dahilan, papatulan ko na talaga siya. And not when I knew I was lacking. I wouldn't fight a losing battle. I'd make myself strong enough so she couldn't terrorize the shit out of me.

"Okay, this ends our class for today. I'll send the scores tonight. If you have any objection, feel free to see me," the prof announced.

Aalis na sana ako nung biglang hatakin ni Ella iyong kamay ko. Napatigil ako.

"Ano ba…" I said in a low voice. Mas lalo lang humigpit iyong hawak niya sa akin.

"I hate you," sabi niya ng isang ulit pa.

I stared back.

"Why hate me? Why not hate the one who dumped you?" naiinis na sabi ko. Ako ba ang nang-iwan sa kanya? Did I ask Avo to leave her for me?! Wasn't I as equally surprised as she was nung sabihin ni Avo na sa kanya ako?!

Why was she making this so hard for me?!

Akmang sasampalin niya ako nung hinuli ko iyong kamay niya.

"I've been really patient with you, but if you dare lay a finger on me, I promise you that I'll hurt you twice worse," I hissed, making her angrier than she already was. Mabilis niyang inalis ang pagkakahawak sa akin at saka ako sinampal.

"You bitch!" sigaw niya.

"Ella!" sigaw ni Avo.

Papalapit si Avo sa akin pero bago pa man siya makalapit, sinampal ko si Ella pabalik. The people around us gasped in unison.

"If I am a bitch, then you are a pathetic bitch! Stop begging for Avo's attention! Aso ka ba?!" hinihingal sa galit na sabi ko.

Akmang susugod siya nung nahawakan siya ni Fuji.

"Let me go! I'll kill you, you slut!"

"I'm not a slut! Whatever I do with Avo, it's none of your business because he's my boyfriend! Isaksak mo sa isip mo!"

Naka-tingin lang kami sa isa't-isa but if looks could kill, we're both dead. Pero wala na akong pakielam. I was tired of being pushed around. Mabuti sana kung may ginawa talaga ako! Pero ako lang 'yung napagbubuntungan niya ng galit! Why? Because for her, I was a mere *Deuxième* so she could push me around?! But I was a *Dieux* just like her! And I could kill her and her family if I wanted!

Oh, my god! She frustrated me so much!

My breathing was hollow. I was so angry.

"You'll pay for this," she said, looking straight into my eye.

"Wala akong utang na babayaran sa 'yo," I replied before I turned my back on her and looked at Avo. "Let's go," I said before pulling Avo with me. Mamatay siya sa galit at inggit. Ubos na ang pasensya ko sa kanya.

Ilang minuto na kaming naglalakad. Hindi ko na alam kung saang parte ng *AdM* kami nandun… but I kept on walking. And walking. And walking. Kailangan kong maglakad para kahit paaano, mabawasan iyong galit ko. I had never been this mad in my entire life. Iyon bang tipong gusto ko ng maiyak sa sobrang galit.

"Are you alright?" he asked, cupping my face. Huminto kami sa isang lugar na maraming puno.

I nodded, not wanting to make him worry…

"Yes," I replied. "Do you have a class?" I said instead, diverting the topic.

Umiling siya.

"I just have to talk to the director, but that can wait," sabi niya.

Ano naman kaya ang pag-uusapan nila ni Madame Jovelyn? Ang dami talagang sikreto ng lugar na 'to…

"No, it's okay. Uuwi muna ako tapos magkita na lang tayo mamaya," I said.

"She can wait." Hinawakan niya ulit iyong mukha ko. "Did something happen while I was away?"

Nakatingin siya nang mabuti sa mga mata ko… as if checking if I was lying.

"Wala. Nakita mo naman, 'di ba? I can take care of myself," I said, feigning a smile.

A smile slowly dawned on his face. I liked the smiling Avo more than the serious, broody one.

"Yeah…" he lazily said with his lopsided smile. "You were quite scary back there, wife."

Natawa naman ako sa kanya.

"I am the scary one? Sa 'yo pa talaga nanggaling?"

He nodded, still wearing that grin.

"You didn't see yourself. You looked like you were going to strangle Ella."

He was right, though. For a second, I really wanted to strangle her and break her neck. Mabuti at hindi ko ginawa. I promised myself that I would never end someone's life. Never.

"I… I was just bluffing. Gusto ko kasi na tigilan niya ako," I told him.

"Was she bothering you?" he asked.

I nodded, not wanting to lie to him.

"She's mad, I know. She hates me, I know. But don't fight my battles for me, Avo. I can take care of her," I said. May sasabihin pa sana siya pero nagsalita na ako bago pa siya magsimula. "She can't hurt me. I promise."

He stared at me, really hard.

"I promise…" I said, cupping his face and gently caressing his cheeks with my thumbs. "I won't be hurt." Because I shouldn't get hurt… or everything would fall apart. I didn't know how… but I didn't want to know why.

"Alright," he breathed.

Avo let me go home first so that I could change. He left me with Laurie, since he seemed pleased that nothing happened to me while he was away… 'Yun ang akala niya. I had a few life-threatening moments while he was gone. Pakiramdam ko nga ay kailangan ko na ng MRI dahil sa dami ng nangyari sa akin. But I would never tell him about it. Kung

dati ay gusto kong sabihin para hindi na siya umalis, ngayon ay ayoko na ring sabihin .. dahil na rin sa mga kakaibang paalala sa akin nila Night, Laurie, at pati ngayon, si Lorenzo na rin.

They're being so weird about this.

"Hey!"

Napa-ngiti ako nung nakita ko si Cathy. Parang ang tagal na naming hindi nagkita kahit na roommates kami. Kasi naman, kapag dadating ako, wala siya. Kapag aalis ako, at saka siya nandun.

"Tapos na ang class?" I asked her. She's taking advanced classes and I think those classes were really hard since minsan, umuuwi siya na maraming pasa. Paano pa kaya kapag ako na ang nandun? Baka maging mainstay na talaga ako ng clinic.

She nodded tapos naupo sa kama.

"Ikaw, kamusta 'yung practical?"

I sighed.

"Ella tried to kill me—well, she almost did. Mabuti na lang at dumating si Avo," I said with a smile. "But okay lang ba sa 'yo kung tuturuan mo ako? I mean, kapag free time..." I asked. I knew that the next time wouldn t be as easy as the last. Alam ko na baka patayin na talaga ako ni Ella. At kasi, wala yata akong mahihingan ng tulong. Laurie will never hurt me—something na hindi maiiwasan kapag naglalaban. I wasn t talking to most *Dieux* except for Lorenzo (whom I didn't want to bore with boring details of my life) and Avo (dahil ayoko na malaman niya kung bakit kailangan kong matuto.)

And most people here in *AdM* tried to get away from me. Na para bang nawalan din ng saysay ang pagtatago ko ng tunay kong pagkatao dahil sa huli, takot pa rin sila sa akin.

At naaalala ko kasi palagi iyong sinabi ni Night. That people will be there... but not always. Kailangan mong matuto na tumayo sa sarili mong paa.

"May ginagawa ako after class, e," Cathy replied.

"Ah... sige, sayang naman."

Pagkatapos kong magpahinga sandali at magpalit, agad na akong lumabas. Laurie was still waiting for me.

"I think Avo's still busy. Gusto mong kumain muna? Sama ka sa amin ni Cathy."

Laurie looked at Cathy.

"No," she answered flatly.

I shrugged.

"Okay," I replied. "Kapag pala nandito si Avo sa school, 'wag mo na akong bantayan," I told her. I bargained for this. Ayoko naman kasi na naka-sunod lang sa akin si Laurie. May buhay din naman siya.

Kumain lang kami sandali ni Cathy. Habang nasa isang resto kami, pinagtitinginan kami ng mga tao. It was amazing how fast news could fly inside this school. Walang cellphone, walang Internet, pero kahit na ganon, mabilis pa ring kumakalat ang nangyayari. And I was a bit curious as to how the news played out. Kadalasan naman kasi sa mga kumakalat na balita, a distorted version of what really happened.

Nung matapos na kami, doon ako naghintay sa labas ng admin building. I didn't want to risk going to the *Dieux*'s dorm dahil baka nandun si Ella. Ilang minuto pa lang akong naghihintay pero naunang lumabas si Lorenzo. He was walking mindlessly, wearing his usual look—our uniform and his black rimmed glasses, at saka may bagong libro na naman siyang hawak.

"Si Avo?" I asked him upon approaching.

"Inside," he timidly replied.

"Matagal pa?"

"Are we close? Why are you talking to me as if we're friends?"

Nalaglag iyong panga ko. Ang taray talaga niya.

"Friends mo lang ba ang pwedeng magtanong sa 'yo?"

He nodded.

"I subscribe to the Utilitarian way of life. If you have no use, I shall dispose," he coldly replied. "And to answer your question, the meeting's about to finish," sabi niya at saka nagsimulang maglakad.

Napa-ngiti ako.

"You answered my question! Does that mean we're friends?" sigaw ko sa kanya pero wala akong nakuhang sagot. Napa-iling na lang ako. Ang suplado ni
Lorenzo.

Dahil sinabi ng kaibigan ko na si Lorenzo na malapit ng lumabas si Avo, hindi na ako naupo ulit. Naglakad na lang ako habang hinihintay sila. I was on my third round when Night and Avo exited the building. I was about to approach them when I heard them talking about Ella.

"Are you sure about this? What about Ella's family? Do you really want to anger them?" Night asked.

Avo looked back.

"I promised."

Chapitre Quatorze

I wanted to know what they were talking about, but they speak nothing about that after. Like it was an unspoken rule. And I didn't have the guts to ask him about it. Everything about *AdM* was still a big puzzle to me. I was trying to survive everyday but still, it didn't feel like home. I was forced to watch for my back every single time, because if I didn't, I might just drop dead one day.

"Why are you here? I told you I'll come get you," Avo said upon seeing me outside the admin building.

Smiling to hide my guilt for listening to their conversation, I said, "Ah… maaga akong natapos. Okay na ba 'yung pinag-usapan niyo?"

He nodded.

"Yeah. I just notified them about what happened outside."

"Kailangan 'yun?"

"Yes. Because depending on the gravity of the situation, the security in this school needs to adjust."

Tss. Para namang hindi safe sa school na 'to. Ilang beses ng may nangyari sa akin, pero wala pa ring nahuhuli. May CCTV sa bawat sulok, pero kahit side profile nung nagkulong sa akin, hindi nakita. How do I entrust my safety in this school if I had seen death a couple of times already?

"Hindi ba safe dito?" I asked.

"It is… Why? Did something happen?"

Agad akong umiling. It was paramount that Avo knows nothing about what happened lately. He needed to be out of it.

"Wala. I'm just asking. If the security in this place is already impeccable, why do they need to tighten? Dapat 24/7, safe ang mga tao dito," I stated. If something happened, especially to the *Dieux*, hell would break loose… Though inside, people were already killing one another. Naalala ko na naman bigla iyong ginawa ni Night 'dun sa mga babae.

Avo nodded.

"I understand. But there's no harm in doubling the safety. After all, we're paying shitload of money, so it's expected that they won't mess anything up."

Ah, yes. I was still adjusting to the fact that in a day, I spend around twenty thousand just to survive. Dinaig pa nito ang first world country sa sobrang taas ng cost of living.

"Do you have enemies?"

He looked at me like he wasn't expecting that kind of question from me. As far as he was concerned, I was a *Deuxième*. Hindi naman siguro kasing dami ng kaaway nun ang mga kaaway ng mga *Dieux* na kagaya niya. And I wouldn't know because I wasn't really hands-on with the family business. My parents put me as far as they possibly could to get me out of the reach of those who wanted to harm me.

"Yes, I have. Tons, actually."

"But you're still… young. I mean, how can you possibly have so many enemies?"

"You'll be surprised," he replied. "Come on, let's eat. I'm famished."

And that was the cue that I should stop asking. Pumunta kami ni Avo sa resto na pinaka-kaunti iyong tao. I was tired of all the stares. Kasalanan ko rin naman, in a way. I was already getting tons of attention because of Avo, tapos ngayon dinagdagan ko pa dahil sa ginawa ko kay Ella. They

must be thinking that I had a death wish of some sort dahil nagawa ko iyon kay Ella.

While eating, Avo was looking at me weirdly.

"What?" I asked.

"Nothing."

"It's not nothing. Why are you staring?"

Umiling siya.

"Avo…" I said. Tumingin siya sa akin. "Can I ask for a favor?"

"Yes," he answered, kahit hindi niya pa alam kung ano iyong hihilingin ko. Sometimes, I still couldn't believe that people were scared of him… Kasi sa akin, hindi naman siya nakaka-takot. If anything, he's gentle. It's like he's trying to always impress me. Which was weird because I was a rank lower than him sa pagkakaalam niya… So if he wanted me, he could definitely have me.

"Can you tell me how… how do you communicate with people outside?" I asked. Kasi hindi ko alam kung paano. Hindi ko rin alam kung paano lalabas dito. It was like I was trapped.

I immediately caught his interest.

"Why?"

I looked at him, debating if I should be honest with him. Pakiramdam ko naman kasi ay mapagkakatiwalaan ko siya… But still, sometimes, I remember people saying that I shouldn't trust anyone. And it's honestly making it harder for me to live in this school. How could I survive not trusting anyone? Hindi ba mababaliw ako dahil doon?

But on the other side, I still couldn't tell him. Malalaman niya ang name ng parents ko, iyong tungkol sa pamilya ko. Kapag nalaman niya ang plano ko, sigurado ako na mabubuko niya na ang pagkatao ko. And I shouldn't be hiding that from him, but I still didn't want to tell him yet. Saka na.

"Nothing," I said, instead. "I'm just interested."

I knew he didn't believe my excuse, but still, he told me that there's a secret passage in this school. It's only known by the members of the

Dieux because in case of emergency, may choice sila na panic room o kaya naman ay tumakas palabas.

"It's a bit unfair. Paano kami? Iyong iba? We'll be left behind to die?"

"You won't die. Of course, I'll take you with me."

"Tss. You're saying that to appease me again."

He grinned.

"Wife, in the game of chess, the pawns always have to die first."

Natigilan ako nung narinig ko iyong sinabi niya. Why did they keep on comparing our lives to the game of chess? Ano ba ang nangyayari? And if we're playing... who's the enemy? Siya ba ang may gustong magpapatay sa akin?

"Because if the King dies, it's game over."

My heart was beginning to thump wildly.

"But... what if the Queen dies?"

Avo looked at me. Maybe that stare was the reason why people were so terrified of him. His stares were lethal.

"She can't. She's the center of the game."

And I wanted to ask who the Queen was... but I was scared of the answer. Because in the game of chess, one wrong move, and it's over. And I was scared to do anything wrong. It was the game of the gods. It wasn't nearly as hypothetical as I was hoping it would be. Actual lives were at stake. Whoever the Queen was, she's got huge responsibility on her shoulder.

Pagkatapos naming kumain ni Avo, hinatid niya na ako sa dorm. Nakita namin si Cathy, but she avoided us. Baka nahihiya pa rin siya. Hindi ko naman kasi alam kung bakit sobrang big deal sa kanila ng mga *Dieux*. They're humans, like us.

"Tomorrow, we'll practice shooting again."

I nodded.

"Moving targets?"

He nodded.

"Are you excited?"

I nodded, eagerly.

"And next time, we'll work on your self-defense."

"But I totally defended myself from Ella!" I argued.

"I know. But she was able to slap you. I don't want that to happen again."

I held my cheeks. Bigla kong naramdaman iyong sampal ni Ella.

"Ah… oo nga," I said. It felt like my cheek would bruise tomorrow. "But I'm fine. Wala kang gagawin kay Ella… okay?"

He stared at me, not saying anything, so I held his hand.

"I'm fine. This is nothing. I mean, it kinda hurts, but it'll get better… And I hate Ella so much, but I'm still trying to hold on to the fact that she's hurt. So let's still be lenient on her," I continued, holding his hand tighter.

Hindi sumagot si Avo. I didn't know if he listened to me, but I sincerely hope that he did… Because what would happen if he did something to Ella? She's also from a strong family. Baka magkagulo dito sa loob ng school kapag nangyari iyon.

Pagkatapos niyang umalis, I prepared to sleep, but I couldn't. I kept on tossing and turning. Gusto kong makipag-usap muna kay Cathy para makatulog ako pero wala naman siya… She's always out at night. So, I decided to go out for a walk. I grabbed my cardigan and brought my ID with me, in case na magutom ako.

I was walking outside, enjoying my cup of hot chocolate when I saw Lorenzo walking.

"Lore—"

Sinundan ko siya papasok sa isang gilid pero nagulat ako nung bigla siyang nawala.

"Lorenzo?" I kept on calling his name pero walang sumasagot. Imposible na bigla na lang siyang nawala kasi sigurado ako na nakita ko siya… Tatalikod na sana ako nung bigla kong naalala iyong sinabi ni Avo na secret passage.

"Holy shit," I murmured to myself.

I stayed there for minutes, trying to figure out how to open the passage. I tried knocking and pushing the wall, but nothing happened. I tried to rearrange the things I found, but still to no avail. Hindi ko alam kung paano bubuksan… and I was losing hope. Tatalikod na sana ako nung biglang may magsalita.

"Memento mori."

Napatingin ako sa likod at nakita si Night. May pinulot siyang parang stick sa baba at saka naglakad hanggang makarating sa pinaka-dulo.

"You have to write that phrase on this part of the wall," he said while writing. "And it will open."

And then there was the secret passage…

"I'm still not talking to you," I told him.

He shrugged. Tapos, tumalikod siya at iniwanan ako. He's freaking weird!

Pumasok ako sa loob. Hindi ako natakot dahil nandun naman si Lorenzo. I followed a path, the one on the center, because there were three. Naglakad lang ako nang naglakad tapos nagulat ako dahil may nakita akong cellphone. So, this must be how they call people! It's so unfair! Ang dami nilang perks!

I grabbed the phone. Walang lock. Walang laman na kahit na ano. But the phone seemed safe… so I dialed my My's secretary's number.

"Hello, Sandra?"

"Yes, who's this?"

"This is Belinda Estrella."

"Can I get the code?"

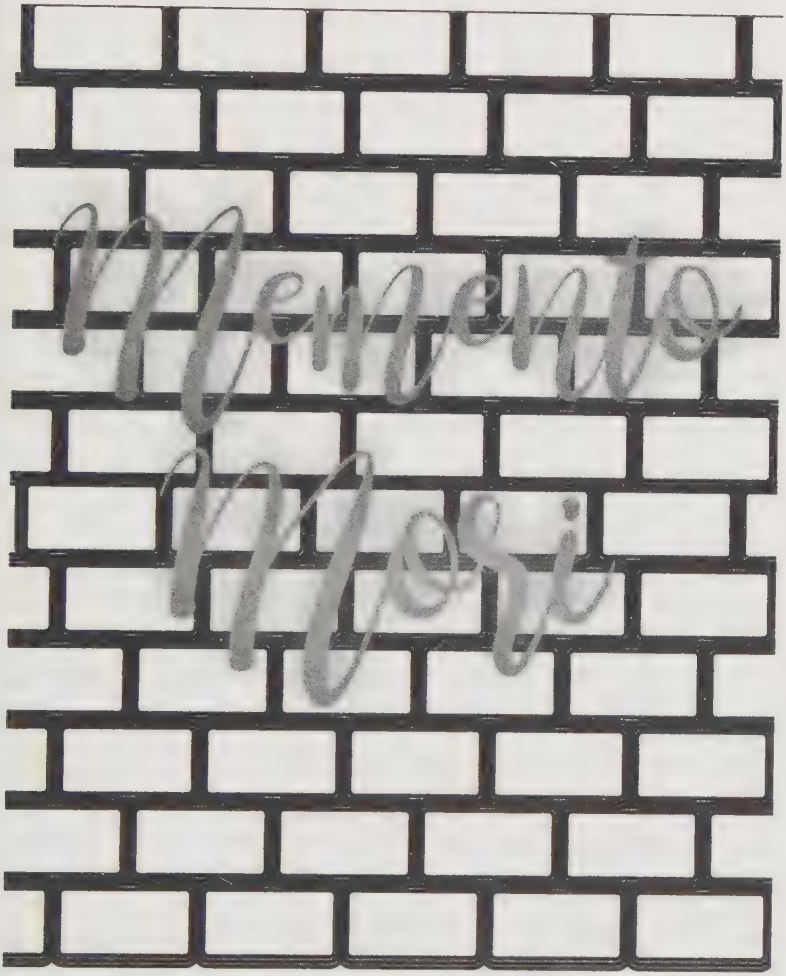
"949766," I said. It was the code for me. Hindi kasi sila basta-basta naniniwala sa mga tumatawag. The security inside my family was also ridiculously insane.

"Yes, Miss Belinda? Anything I can do for you?"

I closed my eyes and sighed.

"I need you…" I trailed off. And then I saw Laurie's face again. I saw

her crying earlier. Gusto kong lumapit pero hindi ko magawa. I knew she didn't want people to pity her… So I wouldn't do that. "I need you to find Laurie Smith's Uncle. And when you find him, kill him. But make it look like an accident. And then make sure that all his properties will be under Laurie Smith."


Memento
Mori

Chapitre Quinze

I held my breath. This was happening all too fast. I had tried to stop this but every time I would remember Laurie's face, I couldn't help but feel remorse against her Uncle. How could he do that to his own blood? He killed an entire family! For what? For power? That's just freaking insane! Money isn't everything. Bakit ba masyadong pinapahalagahan iyon ng mga tao?

"Yes, Miss Belinda. Consider it done. Expect the plan carried out within the next 24 hours," Sandra said.

Closing my eyes, I heaved out a heavy sigh. Was I really doing this? Or was I just blinded by my rage? But someone like him didn't deserve to live… But who was I to decide who gets to live? Was I playing God? Kagaya ng ginawa ni Night nung pinatay niya iyong mga babae?

I was about to withdraw my order when the phone was taken from my hand. Napalingon ako at nakita ko si Lorenzo.

"What are you doing here?" tanong niya sa akin.

"I was talking to someone," I replied and tried to take the phone from him. "May kausap ako."

"You're not allowed here," he pointed out.

"Well, talk to Night about that. He's the one who helped me get inside," sagot ko sa kanya.

"Night?"

I nodded. Akmang aagawin ko sana ulit iyong phone mula sa kamay niya pero ayaw niya talagang ibigay sa akin.

"Sino ba'ng kausap mo?" he said. He tried to listen to the other end of the line, but I was quick to get the phone from him. I didn't know how I was able to do it. He's much taller than me, much stronger than me. Maybe because I was really worried for a second. Baka malaman niya na galing talaga ako sa Mafia Estrella. And he shouldn't know about it. Kailangan mas mauna kong masabi kay Avo, bago pa man kanino. I owed him that, at the very least.

I ended the call, and then delete the details from the log.

"You know, for someone who claims to hate people, you're too nosy," I told him.

"You know, for someone who's not allowed to be here, you're too arrogant," he replied.

I didn't want to give away my real identity, so I remained as impassive as I could. But Lorenzo's smart… he might figure it out on his own. But that's his problem.

"As I have mentioned earlier, if you have a problem with me being here, kausapin mo si Night," I reiterated.

Akala ko ay may sasabihin pa siya pero kibit-balikat lang ang nakuha ko mula sa kanya. He tossed the phone, inilagay iyong kamay sa loob ng bulsa niya, at saka nagsimulang maglakad palabas. He's really… ineffable. I had no words.

Mabilis ko siyang sinundan palabas dahil baka maligaw ako dito sa loob. At isa pa, hindi ko alam kung paano lumabas… if I had to write another phrase, or what. At palagay ko, kung maiwan man ako rito sa loob, hindi ako pag-aaksayahan ng oras na balikan ni Lorenzo o ni Night. O baka balikan nila ako kapag hinanap na ako ni Avo.

"Why were you there?" I asked Lorenzo. As usual, hindi siya sumagot. "Bukod sa phone, ano pa ang nandun?"

He kept on walking, while I kept on throwing him questions. Based on probability, more questions mean higher chances of getting answered. Ang dami ko kasing gustong malaman, pero walang sumasagot. I wanted to ask Avo but at the same time, I didn't want to ask him. I didn't want him getting curious as to why I was curious. He was already facing lots of problems outside, ayoko na dumagdag pa ako.

"Stop asking," he said, after I asked my twentieth question.

"Why?"

"Because the more you know, the more danger you are in."

"But I'm already in danger… don't you think? Someone's trying to kill me. How worse could it get?"

Napa-tingin sa akin si Lorenzo.

"I don't know if you're just naive, or you really just have a death wish…" sabi niya at napatawa naman ako. That's what my mother often told me. "But for everyone's sake, just stay your nose out of things that do not concern you."

"Per—"

"Or just leave me out of it. Kung may guguluhin ka, go to Avo or Night. 'Wag ako," sabi niya tapos iniwanan ako.

Ang sungit.

Nung makabalik ako sa dorm, nandun na si Cathy… But she was already sleeping. Sayang! Gusto ko pa naman sanang makipagkwentuhan muna bago matulog. Imbes kasi na antukin ako, para mas na-trigger lang ni Lorenzo iyong utak ko… Kasi kapag sinasabi sa akin na hindi ko dapat gawin, mas gusto kong gawin…

Around midnight, I was finally able to sleep. I had practicals to worry. I needed all the sleep I could get.

Pagka-gising ko, wala na naman si Cathy. That girl! Hindi ko na talaga siya nakikita. Ganon ba talaga kapag upper level na? Mas busy na? To the point na hindi na masyadong nakakauwi?

Nung dumating ako sa klase, nagtinginan agad sa akin iyong mga kaklase namin. Every time this happened, I always blamed myself for

hating the attention. Why couldn't I just ignore them? It wasn't as if I could do anything about that. They could look, but that's all they'd ever get—a look from afar.

Iniiwasan ko na kausapin si Night… At mabuti na lang dumating na si Avo. Huminga ako nang malalim para kalmahin ang sarili ko. I didn't want him to notice anything. If anything, I wanted him to believe that I was doing fine. Because I really wanted to do things on my own… Hindi iyong parating gusto niyang ginagawa ang lahat para sa akin.

"Good morning," I greeted with a smile. Avo smiled back. "Are you alright? You look… tired."

"Well, yeah. I had to finish things last night."

Bigla akong kinabahan. Nandun din ba siya kagabi? Nakita ba niya ako?

"Were you disturbed? Ella was throwing tantrums again last night," biglang sabi ni Night.

"Yeah…" Avo replied. "I had to transfer to my room because I can hear her from the study area."

Hindi ko alam kung nababasa ba ni Night ang nasa isip ko. He just answered the question inside my head!

"Fuji took care of her," Night continued. Wala namang comment si Avo… Wala yata talaga siyang pakielam kay Ella. Medyo naaawa ako kay Ella. She's practically destroying her life for someone who didn't give a damn about her anymore. That's so… sad.

"I was knocking last night. Did you sleep early?"

"Nah. I went out for a walk," sagot ni Night sabay tingin sa akin. Jerk! "Bakit? May kailangan ka ba?"

Avo only nodded… but I felt that it was about whatever they talked about nung pumunta sila sa admin building. Ano kaya iyon? My curiosity was only worsening. Alam mo iyong may nakahain na pagkain sa harapan mo, pero hindi mo pwedeng kainin kasi alam mo na bawal? It was a torture. Na alam mong may sikreto pero hindi ka pwedeng magtanong dahil hindi mo pwedeng malaman.

Before the professor arrived, Avo told me things I needed to know. Sinabi niya sa akin kung ano ang kailangan kong i-expect sa exams, mga dapat kong gawin para makakuha ako ng mataas na scores.

"Bakit ang dami mong alam? Same year lang naman tayo, 'di ba?"

He just nodded.

"But thanks," I replied. "Kinakabahan ako, e. Para at least kahit mababa ako sa practicals, okay naman 'yung academics ko."

Nung magsimula na iyong exam, gulat na gulat ako dahil nandun halos lahat ng sinabi ni Avo na dapat kong i-expect. I believed I aced the exam! Hindi ako masyadong nakapag-aral dahil sa mga nangyari nitong nakaraang araw but still, I managed to do well.

"Ang galing! Paano mo alam na lalabas lahat 'yun?" I asked in awe. Avo just smiled. "You didn't steal the test papers for me, right?"

Natawa siya.

"No, of course not," sagot niya agad. "Even I, know that that's cheating."

I beamed.

"Well, then, I'll treat you because I fared well," sabi ko sa kanya at saka sabay kaming naghanap ng makakainan. Doon ulit kami ni Avo sa walang tao. I asked him things I wanted to know about him… Kasi kahit boyfriend ko siya, parang wala naman akong masyadong alam sa kanya.

"Is this necessary?" he asked.

I nodded.

"I only know your name. Augustus Voltaire Ostenhaimer. Tapos wala na akong alam."

He nodded. "Fine, ask me."

I smiled cheekily and began asking him things I wanted to know. Minsan kasi, may narinig akong nag-uusap… na bakit biglang pinalitan ni Avo si Ella… Ayon sa mga narinig ko, kahit on and off ang relasyon ni Avo and Ella dati, they were happy. They grew up together and they're really tight. But one day, things started to fall apart. I wanted to ask Avo that… pero paano ko tatanungin? How would I ask him without

sounding like I was prying?

"...so basically, you grew up in France, relocated here, studied here almost all your life, and you have innumerable hobbies that include target shooting, archery, equestrianism, fencing, drifting?"

He nodded.

"What about the other *Dieux*? Kailan mo sila nakilala?"

He still didn't seem bothered by my questions... Mukhang hindi pa naman niya nahahalata.

"I met them all in this school."

"Even Ella?" I prodded.

He nodded.

"She's the first one to befriend me when I arrived," he replied.

"Did you..." I trailed. "Did you... love her?"

Avo looked at me.

"Why?" he asked.

"I just want to know."

"No," he replied.

"Tell me. Hindi naman ako masasaktan. Did you love her? Before?"

Tinignan niya akong mabuti, na para bang sinusukat niya kung paano niya sasagutin ang tanong ko. But I just wanted him to be honest. Because at least, I deserved that...

"We wouldn't last for years if I didn't love her."

And that was the end of our discussion for today. I learned enough.

Pagkatapos naming kumain ni Avo, nagpaalam na ako para dumiretso sa next na klase ko. Practical exam namin sa target shooting ngayon at gusto kong dumating ng maaga. Magpa-practice na lang ako gamit iyong free time ko... But even before I could hold the gun, may gumulo na naman sa akin.

"Did what you have to do?"

I tried to tune out Night's voice, but it was hard... especially when he seemed keen on talking to me.

"Why don't you just talk to Laurie?"

Night cocked his head and smiled smugly.

"Laurie's fine… she has a guardian angel."

Natigilan ako sa sinabi niya. I pursed my lips. I remained deadpanned. Night's smug smile only grew… smugger.

"Around 5am, her Uncle's house caught fire. But miraculously, he left a will inside his vault. So, Laurie's reinstated as a *Deuxième*," he said, checking my expression as he uttered every word. May alam ba siya? Alam ba niya na ako ang may gawa nun? And damn, Sandra! I didn't expect that she'd be able to do that in a short period of time. I really never realized the graveness of the line of business. I just did one call… and hours later, someone's dead.

Who said words aren't powerful?

"Funny how the world works, huh?"

Tipid akong ngumiti.

"Must be a relief for you. You won't have to console her… My bad. You never did. Wala ka nga palang pakielam."

But he only laughed at me. This asshole. Siya ang dapat kinatatakutan dito sa *AdM*, e! He's a psycho in the making! At least si Avo, he's black and white. But Night? He's all shades of fucked up, and that's seriously scary. Na naka-ngiti siya, pero babarilin ka niya. Na tahimik siya, pero papatayin ka. He's a contradiction, and that made him unpredictable… and dangerous.

"I care. I just have a different way of showing my care."

"Must be fun to be loved by you," I spat.

"Yeah… Too bad you wouldn't know how," he replied.

Chapitre Seize

Since Avo told me about his feelings for Ella, I had been avoiding him. Hindi ko alam kung bakit… It wasn't as if he told me that he's still in love with her. He loved her. Past tense… but still, I had this haunting feeling inside me. That something wasn't right. I just couldn't point it out, but something was seriously wrong.

And I couldn't think around him. I needed to take a few steps back, because I couldn't function properly when he's crowding me. Pero paano ko iyon magagawa? He's around. Isang linggo na siyang nandito sa *AdM*; isang linggo na rin akong nagdadasal na sana ay magkaroon siya ng dapat gawin sa labas para naman makahinga ako. Pero wala, e. It seemed like things were going well outside… kung kailan kailangan ko siya na maging busy.

Instead of wallowing on what was already happening, I decided to focus on other things instead. I couldn't go to the shooting range, though. Avo knew that I frequented that place. Hindi rin pwede sa cafeteria o sa kung saan na restaurant dahil masyadong public. Avo had eyes everywhere, and it was making it hard to hide from him.

And it was a weekend. Kung magkukulong ako sa kwarto, sigurado ako na pupuntahan niya rin ako.

"Do you know a place na hindi masyadong alam ng mga tao?" I asked

Cathy. It was the first time, in weeks, na nagising ako na nandito siya. She was usually out when I wake up. Mabuti na lang at hindi yata siya masyadong busy ngayon.

Umiling siya.

"Most students have been here for years. Sigurado ako na alam na nila halos lahat ng lugar," she answered.

"Ganon ba? So… walang mapagtataguan talaga dito?"

It seemed like I caught her attention.

"You're hiding?"

I nodded.

"From who?"

"From Avo," I replied. "Kasi… I know this might sound immature, but I asked him about Ella. Naiinis ako kahit sinagot lang naman niya iyong tanong ko… Pero alam mo 'yun? He planted a seed of doubt in my mind. He said he loved her… tapos bigla niyang iniwan? There's no clean reason. Just… poof. One day, he left her for me. Alam mo 'yun? Parang… you'll end up asking questions because things have become sketchy all of a sudden," paliwanag ko sa kanya.

Hindi siya nakasagot. I didn't know how to take it. Dapat bang mas kabahan ako? Kasi sa aming dalawa, mas alam niya iyong history ni Ella at Avo.

"Do I trust him?"

Hindi pa rin siya sumasagot.

"Things happened way too fast, alam ko. But he wore me down. Babae lang din naman ako, and because he kept on saying words to swoon me, I gave in… And now, I'm thinking that I should have waited."

Akala ko hindi pa rin siya magsasalita pero sa wakas, may lumabas na rin sa bibig niya.

"Avo and Ella are done. He's with you. Why are you doubting things?"

Napatingin ako sa kanya. It was unexpected of her to answer this

way... Hindi naman kasi siya ganito dati. She kept on reminding me to be skeptic at all times.

"'Di ba ikaw ang nagsabi sa akin na trust no one?" I asked.

She pursed her lips.

"What's wrong with being skeptical? I just want to take a breather and think things... kasi ang bilis talaga, Cathy. Parang all this time, I was living in a bubble. Tapos kahapon lang pumutok 'yung lobo na 'yun," paliwanag ko sa kanya. "So, is it wrong?"

Hindi siya sumagot. She sighed. I smiled.

"Anyway, thank you. I'll just look around," sabi ko at saka tumayo. Palabas na sana ako ng kwarto namin nung bigla siyang magsalita.

"Ask Night," she said. "He knows things."

Napatingin ako sa kanya.

"Do I trust him?"

But she didn't answer.

Lumabas ako ng kwarto namin, looking and checking for Avo. I had managed to successfully avoid him for a week now, ayoko naman na ngayon pa ako mahuli. At isa pa, ang alam ko kapag weekend ay busy ang mga *Dieux*. Hindi ko nga lang alam dahil hindi naman ako curious sa mga ginagawa nila. I was just hoping that they're busy enough.

Habang naglalakad ako sa isang tagong parte ng school, napatago ako sa likod ng isang bench nung makita kong sabay na naglalakad si Avo at Ella. I closed my eyes, and started to breathe. I didn't want to think things.

But Ella held his hand...

Akala ko pipigilan niya.

Pero hindi.

They just kept on walking.

My jaw clenched. I fisted my hand. Paanong hindi ako mag-iisip ng iba kung ganito ang nakikita ko? Last night, he told me that he'd be busy with his tasks. Hindi ko naman alam na si Ella pala ang task niya. Naiinis ako. Naiinis ako na akala ba niya tanga ako na hindi ko malalaman? Kung

mahal niya pa si Ella, then by all means, be with her! Bakit ba nila ako dinadamay sa kung anuman ang meron sila?

At paano ko masasabi sa kanya iyong tungkol sa tunay kong pagkatao kung sa ganito pa lang, nililoko niya na ako?

My eyes were probably shooting daggers as I walked the opposite direction. I really needed to find my own hiding place, pronto. I needed to be able to hide from Avo.

Habang hindi ko pa alam ang gagawin, patago akong pumunta sa daan palabas. I checked the surroundings and when I was sure that I was alone, I picked up the stick and wrote the phrase *Memento Mori* on the wall. And a few seconds after, the wall opened before me. Pumasok ako agad sa loob, dahil sigurado naman ako na walang *Dieux* doon ngayon. I just didn't want to encounter anyone, lalo na si Fuji. If he saw me here, he'd probably strangle me. And he'd kill me, dahil wala namang makakakita.

I looked for the phone and it was still in the same position kung saan binato siya ni Lorenzo. Siguro wala pang pumapasok dito simula noon. I quickly dialed Sandra's number and verified myself.

"Can I talk to my mom?"

"Miss Belinda, Madam Estrella is currently occupied. But I'll relay this message."

"Can you tell her I'm on the line right now? I really need to talk to her."

Maybe I could tell her that I didn't need to be here. Kung gusto niya akong ikulong sa bahay, o kaya naman ay ipatapon pabalik sa Japan, I could promise to have no qualms about it… I really didn't like this place. It was doing me more harm than good.

"I'm sorry, Miss Belinda, she's really busy."

I sighed. She's always busy. Hindi ko pa siya nakakausap simula noon. Alam ko naman na marami silang ginagawa pero kahit ba ilang minuto, hindi nila magawa na maglaan para sa akin?

"What about my dad?"

I heard her sigh from the other line.

"He's also—"

I didn't let her finish. Alam ko na iyong sasabihin niya.

"Fine… Just… Just tell them to contact me," I said. Sabi naman ni Madame Jovelyn, kung ang mga magulang namin mismo ang cocontact, makakausap nila kami. It's students contacting their family that wasn't allowed. But the other way around was possible. "I really need to talk to them."

"Yes, Miss Belinda," Sandra replied.

I was about to end the call when I remembered about what I asked her to do.

"And Sandra? Don't let anyone know about what I asked you to do."

"Yes, Miss Belinda. I will erase all tracks that may lead to you."

"Thank you," I said and the finally ended the call. Ibinalik ko sa pinagkuhanan ko iyong cellphone. I wanted to explore this place, but I felt like any minute now, bigla na lang may papasok na *Dieux*… and I was not willing to risk it.

Lumabas ulit ako para maghanap ng pwesto. Ilang minuto na akong naghahanap pero wala akong makita… Baka tama nga si Cathy. I needed to ask Night… pero paano? How do I talk to that guy? He gave me the creeps.

I was still pondering on whether I should talk to Night or not nung nakita ko siya. This guy was everywhere!

Huminto ako nung nakita ko siya. Huminto rin siya. His left hand was inside his pocket, and his other hand was holding a lollipop. Seriously? Nakatingin lang siya sa akin, at nakatingin lang din ako sa kanya. This was awkward.

"What?" sabi niya. I pursed my lips. Hindi ko alam kung paano sisimulan. "Do you need anything?"

"What do you know about Avo and Ella?"

"Why?"

"Are they still seeing each other? Behind my back?"

Akala ko sasagot siya, but instead, he took a step closer. Nahigit ko iyong hininga ko dahil sa ginawa niya. Why was he so intense? He wasn't even doing it purposely! It's just that… I couldn't handle him. He kept on surprising me every step of the way. He threw me off my game. Avo couldn't even do this to me.

"Do you think Ella will be that mad if they're still seeing each other?" he replied.

My jaw clenched.

"Malay ko? If it's a part of some elaborate scheme?"

And there was that smug smile again! Nakaka-inis!

"Why? Sino ka ba? Who are you for them to scheme?"

Napaawang iyong labi ko sa sinabi niya. And when he took another step closer… Jesus Christ!

"Are you keeping secrets, Boe Estrella?" he said, his voice laced with danger.

And another step. He was too close.

"Breathe," he whispered. "Do I make you nervous?"

Naka-tingin lang ako sa mata niya. I wanted to say things. I wanted to refute him, pero walang lumalabas sa bibig ko. Bakit hindi ako makapagsalita nang maayos kapag nandito siya? Bakit ba ako ginaganito ni Night?!

So I pushed him away, pero nahawakan niya iyong kamay ko. Binawi ko iyon pero ayaw niyang bitawan.

"Avo's not with Ella, if that's your problem. He has given his word, and he is loyal to you," sabi niya… Pero hindi pa rin ako naniniwala. Something's definitely wrong.

"Then why did they break up? All of a sudden?" I dared ask.

He looked at me, and smiled… but that smile was disarming. And alarming.

"You know what? You really shouldn't ask questions like that."

"Why not? Why not when it's affecting me?"

Binitawan niya iyong kamay ko.

"Avo and Ella broke up because it needed to happen. That's the answer."

Napaawang iyong labi ko.

"Because it needed to happen? What the hell, Night? Mas lalo mo lang ginulo ang isip ko!" I shouted at him. Nakakainis. Mas lalo niya lang dinadagdagan

iyong mga tanong sa isip ko dahil sa mga sinasabi niya!

"Kaya nga sabi ko sa 'yo… don't ask questions."

"And what? Live with uncertainties?"

Umiling siya.

"It's not time yet," he replied.

"Time for what?"

He didn't answer. He took a step back. He looked at me, and those eyes screamed all the secrets I needed to unravel.

"This is bigger than you, than me, than us. So… just play the game."

Chapitre Dix Sept

Nine days. It was how long I managed to avoid Avo. Hard as I tried to avoid him, seeing him was inevitable. We go to the same school; we have the same classes. Akala ko tatagal iyong puro tango lang ako kapag kinakausap niya ako, pero hindi pala. He humored me for a few days, but today, the act was done.

"Do we have a problem?" he asked.

We were in the middle of the hallway. Maraming tao sa paligid namin, pero wala silang magawa… because Avo was Avo. And it wasn't as if I could run from him. I was trapped in between his arms.

"Look at me," he commanded, but I kept my gaze down. I didn't want to look at him. Tuwing nakikita ko siya, naaalala ko iyong pagsisinungaling niya sa akin. If he had told me that he was going to see Ella, I would have been fine with it. I just didn't like being lied to. I hated it. That's my hard limit.

I kept my lips pursed, and my breathing even. I shouldn't be affected… but I was. Pero hindi niya kailangang malaman iyon.

"I said look at me," he repeated. I could feel the tension coming from him, but I held my place. He should know that I wasn't scared of him. Hindi ako kagaya ng mga tao sa *AdM* na takot sa kanya. I wouldn't bow down just because he asked me to.

Just as I was about to get away from him, he held my chin and forced me to look at him. At nung nagtama ang tingin namin, I saw how frustrated he was of me. It was so fucking evident, pero pinipigilan niya. Ano ba ang meron sa akin? Why the hell was he treating me like I was some porcelain doll? Nasaan na iyong Avo na sinasabi nila na nakakatakot? Why did I feel like he was the one afraid of me?

"Do we have a problem?"

I breathed hard. And I stared hard.

"None."

"Then why are you pushing me away?"

"I'm not."

"Do you think I'm stupid?"

"No, but why are you asking stupid questions?"

Nagtinginan lang kami sa isa't-isa. No one wanted to break the stare, but he eventually gave up. And sighed. I frustrated him too much, but why was he still sticking around? If he wanted Ella, then by all means be with her again. Hindi ko naman siya pipigilan. Hindi ko rin siya hahabulin. Kung gusto niya, ihahatid ko pa siya. I wasn't an Estrella for nothing. I don't go around begging for someone's love.

"Boe…" he trailed. "Just tell me what the hell your problem is."

Tinabig ko iyong kamay niya sa gilid ko.

"Wala nga akong problema," I replied stubbornly.

With his jaw clenched, he said, "Okay, then. If we don't have a problem, then let's have lunch."

At wala na akong nagawa dahil hinatak niya ako palabas. The people made way for us, and I hated them for fearing Avo so much. Why were they so afraid of him? Ano ba talaga ang meron? I really should find out! Kasi sigurado ako na hindi lang dahil isa siyang *Dieux* kaya kinatatakutan siya. Lorenzo, Fuji, Ella, and Night were *Dieux*, too, but they weren't as feared as Avo was!

"Where do you want to eat?" he asked.

"Anywhere."

Akala ko makikipagtalo pa siya sa akin, pero hindi. Mukhang pagod na rin siya, dahil napagod ako sa pag-uusap namin kanina. Dinala niya ako sa pinakamalapit na restaurant. And he probably sensed that I was in no mood to engage, so he ordered food for me, too. Akala ko matatahimik na kami, pero habang naghihintay ng pagkain, nagsimula na naman siyang kausapin ako.

"There's a mid-semester party on Friday. Do you want to go with me?"

"Why me?" I asked.

"Because you're my wife," he replied.

"How exactly did you fall in love with me, Avo?"

"What do you mean?"

"Why do you call me your wife? Why am I with you? Why... me? Because you just met me. And please don't give me that bullshit of a reason na love at first sight. I don't believe in that," I said to him without breaking eye contact. I needed him to know that I was serious. And I needed real answer. I had been really naive before, and I was suffering the consequences. I needed the truth from him, because if not, how would I be able to trust him?

I had so many things I wanted to say... I had so many secrets I wanted to share... but I couldn't do that if I didn't trust him completely.

As seconds passed, it felt like a staring contest. I tried so hard to read his eyes, but I couldn't understand what he was thinking. Was he thinking about lying to me? Was he thinking of a reason that I would believe?

What was going on inside his head?

"Why are you asking me this?"

"Why aren't you answering me? Is it that hard?" I shot back.

He wanted to talk to me, he got what he asked for. Nandito na ako sa harap niya. We would talk, but we would talk about the things I wanted to know. Kasi once and for all, gusto kong malaman. Napapagod na ako na maraming iniisip. Na paulit-ulit na bumabalik lang din sa kanila ni

Ella. It was exhausting.

"It was the first time I saw you," he began. I held my breath while listening to him. I didn't want to miss a word that he said. "You looked pissed, and then when our eyes met, you looked really angry."

"You fell for me because I looked angry?" hindi makapaniwala kong tanong.

"No… it's just that… you're different. From the people in this school. You didn't seem afraid. And it was… a sight."

"That still doesn't explain the fact that you dumped Ella for me. I don't understand, Avo. How can you dump someone you loved for years just because there's someone new you fancy? That doesn't even make sense," I explained.

If he thought I'd accept whatever answer he'd throw my way without even asking, then he clearly didn't know me at all. O baka naman dahil hindi niya talaga ako kilala… because the time we spent apart was longer than the time we were together. Palagi siyang nasa labas. Palagi akong naghihintay sa kanya. And I didn't even know why I was waiting… Was I that thirsty for affection that I fell for his words right away? Without even bothering to question his intention?

"With the kind of life we live, life is short. Why will I waste my time with Ella if it's clear that I want to be with you?"

"Because it doesn't make sense!"

Wala akong pakielam kung pagtinginan kami. Sanay na ako. And I just wanted answers! If I had to shout to get answers from him, then I would make his ears bleed!

"Why does everything have to make sense to you?" he said, teeth gritting in frustration.

"Because I want to understand!"

"What don't you understand? I want you. You. What more do you want to know?"

My lips parted. Why couldn't he fucking come up with a more believable answer? Because as hard as I was trying to believe him, all I

heard was him sprouting lies.

I sighed.

"Maybe this is wrong. I don't know what possessed me to agree to be with you. I don't even know you, Avo," I said. I tried to hold myself together. I needed to do this. Kailangang magawa ko 'to ngayon... because I didn't know when I would find the strength again to do this. "I don't know you."

Tumayo na ako.

"We can be friends," I said and offered a smile. "Let's be just that."

I turned around and began walking. I could feel the pain constricting inside my chest. I closed my hands and kept on walking. I should just keep on walking... Para sa akin 'to. I needed to do this for myself. I didn't deserve something he wasn't even sure himself.

"Unbelievable," I said as I feel tears dropping. "Why am I crying? I don't even love him yet."

But tears just kept on flowing.

Maybe I was in love with him... I didn't know anymore. All I knew was that it hurt.

I walked and walked until my feet gave up on me. Naupo ako sa damuhan at saka niyakap iyong tuhod ko. I didn't want to cry but these stupid tears wouldn't stop on flowing. I was sobbing like a fucking kid and I hated it. I hated that he had a control over me. He didn't deserve that. He didn't deserve anything from me.

Hindi ko alam kung gaano na ako katagal doon. I didn't even bother to go to my class anymore. Gusto ko lang mapag-isa. Ayoko na may makakita sa akin na ganito. I may be weak, but nobody needed to know that I was weak. My mother said that appearance is everything... so I must appear strong even if I was just
faking it.

It was already dark when I decided to stand up. My legs felt dead, but I needed to go back to the dorm already. The classes ended and I didn't want to see Avo. Nagmamadali akong maglakad, iniiwasan lahat ng tao pero may nakabangga pa rin ako.

"Cover your face."

Napatingin ako sa nag-abot sa akin ng baseball cap.

"Don't show them that you cried," sabi ni Laurie at saka inilagay sa ulo ko iyong baseball cap at saka ibinaba para matakpan iyong mga mata ko. "Let's go."

Sumabay ako sa kanya habang naglalakad.

"How did you—"

"Everyone knows," she replied. "You dumped him in a public place."

Hindi ako naka-sagot agad. It still amazed me how fast news can travel in a god-forsaken place like this.

Medyo matagal na kaming naglalakad ni Laurie pero walang nagsasalita. Nung makarating kami sa dorm, iiwan niya na ako nung pigilan ko siya.

"What?" she asked.

"Won't you even ask me if I'm okay?"

"Why would I even ask the obvious? You look like shit," sagot niya.

Bigla akong natawa.

"Bagay kayo ni Night," I said and then her expression changed. I hit a nerve. "I'm sorry," I continued. "I shouldn't have said that."

"It's alright."

Tinignan ko siya. She looked okay... but how could she be okay? Matagal sila ni Night... I was sure she loved him. How do you get over from something like that in such a short amount of time? It hadn't even been two months since they broke up.

"Do you still love him?" I asked her.

"Of course," she quickly admonished.

"Then why don't you get him back?"

It wasn't like Night had other girls... wala naman siyang kasama

palagi bukod sa mga *Dieux*.

"You can't get someone back if that someone doesn't want to return."

"Night loves you," I said.

"I know," she said with a small smile. "But he's not in love with me. There's a difference."

Pinilit kong makatulog pero hindi ko magawa. I kept on tossing and turning until I decided that it was best for me to take a walk.

"San ka pupunta?" Cathy asked.

"I'll take a walk," I replied. "I'll be back later."

I grabbed my hoodie, kung sakaling malamigan ako. I opted for a walk farthest from the dorm of the Dieux. Naglakad lang ako nang naglakad. I just wanted to ease my mind so that I could sleep peacefully. Ayoko naman na kahit sa panaginip ay dalawin ako ni Avo.

Habang naglalakad ako, bigla akong hinarang ng apat na lalaki.

"Hi," sabi nung isa sa kanila. Bigla akong inakbayan at saka pinilit na maglakad. "Lakad lang, Estrella," the guy whispered, and I felt a sharp material poking my side.

"Sino kayo?"

"Don't ask yet, there are cameras everywhere."

"Hindi ba naka-disable?" the other guy asked.

"Naka-disable, but just to be sure. We don't want to mess with the wrong people," the guy beside me said. "Walk faster."

Biglang lumakas iyong kabog ng dibdib ko. Where the fuck were they taking me?!

"Ano'ng gagawin niyo sa akin?!"

Mas dumiin iyong patalim sa gilid ko.

"Don't shout," he said. "Malapit na tayo."

Ilang beses kong inisip kung papaano ako makakaalis pero apat silang nakapalibot sa akin. At gabi na! Wala ng tao sa paligid! And they fucking

disabled the cameras! Hindi ako makasigaw dahil walang makakarinig sa akin!

Nagulat ako nung dalhin nila ako sa lugar kung saan nandon ang daan palabas ng *AdM*. Bumilis ang tibok ng puso ko nung isulat nila ang *Memento*
Mori sa pader at biglang bumukas iyon.

"Totoo nga!" the guy said in awe. "Fucking *Dieux*. They all have the fun in this place."

Hinila nila ako papasok pero kahit ano'ng pagpupumiglas ko, hindi ako makawala sa kanila. I was terrified. I wanted to shout for help. I wanted to cry. I was scared.

"Who wants to go first?"

"A-anong gagawin niyo sa akin?"

"Ako muna," the guy said and then he began taking his belt off.

"What do you want?! I'll give it to you!"

Lumapit siya sa akin.

"It's a done deal, babe," sabi niya at saka hinawakan iyong mukha ko. "You shouldn't have broken up with your protector… and angered the wrong people."

I slapped his hand away from my face but he just gave me a sinister smile.

"Hostility won't do you good, Miss. No one can hear you scream here."

"What do you want?! Pera ba?! I'll give it to you! I'll triple whatever they offered! Don't do this!"

Tumawa siya.

"It's not about the money."

"Then ano?! Tell me!"

But instead of telling me, he tore my shirt apart and pinned me against the wall.

"You bastard! Bitiwan mo nga ako!" I shouted but they only laughed at me. "I'll kill you all! I'll fucking kill you if you touch me!"

"What can you do to me? You're not above us, Miss. You don't scare us."

"I'm an Estrella! I'll fucking kill your entire family!" I shouted pero mas tumawa lang sila.

"'Di kami tanga, Miss. The Estrella doesn't have an heir anymore," he said and then pulled the strap of my bra down. "He died three years ago. We all know it."

My tears began to pool in my eyes. I was scared for myself. I was so scared and no one was there to help me.

"That was my brother!" I explained but they wouldn't hear any of it.

Someone came near me and slammed my head against the wall. Paulit-ulit. Hindi siya tumigil hanggang sa wala na akong maramdaman. I could feel the blood flowing on my face.

Umiyak ako pero walang nakikinig.

Humingi ako ng tulong pero walang sumaklolo.

Tears flowed when he kissed my neck.

"Let's have a taste. Girlfriend ni Avo 'to, 'di ba? Tikman natin!" sabi niya at saka tumawa sila na parang mga demonyo.

"May sinabi ba na 'wag patayin?"

"Wala naman... pero papatayin ba natin?"

I wanted to beg. I wanted them to kill me. Huwag lang nila akong hawakan. I didn't know how to continue living after they touch me.

How would I be able to look at my reflection after what they did to me?

"Mamaya na natin isipin. Tikman muna natin."

He flipped me over until I was face to face with him.

"'Wag kang umiyak. Masasarapan ka, promise," he said and then unhooked my bra. "Hindi kami *Dieux* kagaya ng boyfriend mo, pero papaligayahin ka namin."

Ipinikit ko ang mga mata ko.

Nagsimula siyang halikan ang leeg ko pababa sa dibdib ko. I bit my lip when I felt him nipping my breasts.

And after he was done, he made me kneel.

"Open your mouth," he said.

Umiiyak ako na umiling.

I was slapped.

"Ibubuka ang bibig o papasabugin namin 'yang bungo mo?!"

He kneeled and then forced me to open my mouth. He put a gun inside my mouth and then thrusted it repeatedly.

"Ginagawa mo ba 'to kay Avo, ha?" sabi niya habang patuloy na pinapasok at nilalabas ang baril sa bibig ko. Wala akong magawa kung hindi ang umiyak. "Isa kang puta gaya ng lahat ng babae sa lugar na 'to. Gagawin niyo lahat para makasama sa *Dieux*. Mga desperadang puta. Sa tingin niyo ba ay papakasalan kayo nung mga gagong 'yun?" sabi niya at saka tumawa.

Why couldn't he just pull the trigger and end this?

"Lalaspagin lang nila kayo at itatapon."

At patuloy niyang inilabas at ipinasok ang baril sa bibig ko.

"Kaya bakit ka umiiyak? 'Di ba sanay ka naman sa ganito? Kasi isa ka ring puta. Ikaw. Si Laurie. Mga putang dumidikit sa *Dieux* para sa kapangyarihan."

Inilabas niya ang baril mula sa bibig ko.

"Bilisan mo! Kami naman!"

Gusto ko ng mamatay.

"Sandali lang!" he said. "Bend over," he whispered to my ear. Mabilis na pinatalikod niya ako at saka ibinaba ang suot ko. His hands snaked inside my underwear, touching me.

"I will take you like the whore that you are."

Ipinasok niya ang daliri niya sa loob ko.

"Hindi man ako *Dieux*, papaligayahin kita, Boe. Para naman malaman mo na hindi lang *Dieux* ang magaling sa putanginang lugar na 'to."

I bit my lower lip.

Tears fell down.

I just wanted to die.

"Teka lang," sabi niya habang hinahawakan ako. "In Omni— Shit."

Bigla niyang tinanggal ang kamay niya sa loob. As if touching me would bring him death.

"Ano na? Bilisan mo, tangina ka! Ang tagal mo!"

"Fuck, Jude!"

"Ano?! Sarap na sarap ka?! Kami naman, tangina nito!"

"Gago ka! Estrella 'to!"

At saka niya ako binitawan.

"Ano?!"

"Puta—paanong Estrella din 'yan?!"

But it was too late.

I couldn't feel anything anymore.

Chapitre Dix Huit

"Holy f—"

I gave up fighting.

"Bakit?"

"Look!"

"Holy mother of— Tangina."

"Tangina ka, Jude! Look at this! Mas lalo tayong mapapahamak, tanga ka!"

I laid there, quietly sobbing.

"Shit! Shit! Totoo nga?!"

"Basahin mo 'tong naka-tattoo sa likod niya!"

"*In Omnia Paratus*. So? Ano ibig sabihin niyan?"

"Tangina, Jude! Anak nga siya ng Estrella! Shit ka! Family motto nila 'yan!"

Silence. I wanted to sleep.

"Akala ko ba si Oli 'yung nag-iisang anak?!"

"Ano gusto mo?! Tanungin ko pa sa nanay nila kung bakit dalawa ang anak niya?!"

My eyes felt heavy.

"Shit. Ano'ng gagawin natin sa kanya?"

"Hindi pa naman natin nagagalaw."

"Pano pag sinumbong tayo niyan? Patayin na lang kaya natin?"

"Gago! E 'di tayo ang pinatay ng pamilya niyan!"

My head was hurting.

"E ano ngang gagawin natin?!"

"Sino ba kasi ang nag-utos sa 'yo?! Shit ka naman, oh! Ga-graduate na lang tayo at lahat, pinahamak mo pa kami!"

"E ano nga ang gagawin?! Iwan na lang natin dito?!"

"Pa'no tayo?"

"'Di ko alam. Lalabas ba tayo o dito lang? Delikado parehas. Sa loob, patay tayo kay Avo. Sa labas, patay tayo sa Estrella. Shit. Kasalanan mo 'to, Jude! Magpapakamatay ka na lang, dinamay mo pa kami!"

I didn't know what exactly happened, but when I opened my eyes, I was alone. I gathered myself and stood up. I picked up my hoodie and wore it.

There was blood on my head. And I could still feel their hands on me.

"Don't cry," I kept on reminding myself. "Don't cry. You're alive. You're strong."

I kept on telling that to myself. I kept on lying. I kept on making myself believe that what happened didn't kill a part of my soul. But it did... there was a part of me that would never recover.

"H-hello, Sandra?"

"Yes, Miss Belinda."

"H-how long c-can you send s-someone over to pick me up?"

"From AdM, Miss Belinda?"

"Yes."

I tried to make my breathing even. My hands were shaking and tears were threatening to fall again. I wiped them before they can even leave my eyes. Enough tears, Boe. Tama na.

"I'm sorry, Miss, but your parents—"

"Pick me up and I'll deal with my parents."

"Okay, Miss..."

I ended the call and closed my eyes. My lips were quivering. My chest was tightening. My hands were shaking.

"I will kill you," I said as I look around me. "I will kill you," I said as tears began dropping.

I saw the wall. I saw the blood.

I will have your lives for what you did to me.

When the driver came to pick me up, I ignored his worried stare.

"Miss Belinda, your head is bleeding."

"I know. Let's go home," I said as I get inside the car.

Habang nasa loob ng sasakyan ako, hindi ko pa rin mapigilan iyong galit sa loob ng dibdib ko. I wanted to hurt someone. I wanted to make someone feel the pain that I was feeling. I wanted to give them thrice the suffering I was bearing.

"Don't cry," I reminded myself again as I fell asleep.

I was tired.

As I entered the house, I instructed the driver to pick-up Sandra from the office. Umakyat agad ako papunta sa kwarto ko. I never appreciated the fact that my parents were never around aside from today. They would never know what happened.

I stepped under the shower and began scrubbing myself.

"This never happened," I kept on repeating until my skin felt sore and painful. I scrubbed and scrubbed… na para bang mababura noon iyong ginawa nila sa akin.

My skin was all red when I was done. I quickly got dressed and covered myself up. Umupo ako sa harap ng dresser at saka sinuklayan iyong buhok ko. Tinignan ko iyong mukha ko sa salamin.

"You will make them pay. And then when they're dead, this never happened."

I couldn't even recognize myself. There was a cut on my forehead and my eyes was sore from crying. There was a bruise forming on my cheek. And there was a cut on the side of my lips when…

They would pay for this.

I went down to meet Sandra. She was looking at me, her face impassive. Good. I couldn't deal with pity. I didn't need pity. I needed retribution.

"I'm sorry for making you come here," I said as it was 4 in the morning.

"It's alright, Miss Belinda."

We went to my parents' study. It was my first time going inside this place. I never bothered going here because I had no interest in their work… And I wasn't even supposed to follow their footsteps. That was my brother's role. At least before he was killed.

Habang nakaupo kami, nag-ipon ako ng lakas ng loob para masabi iyong dapat ko sabihin. I wanted to say a lot of things. I wanted to kill them, to torture them, to burn them, to skin them. I wanted to hurt them so bad… But no words came out. Tears did, but I held them.

"I want you to," I said, my breathing ragged. "Find someone named Jude. He's a graduating student…" I pursed my lips and forced myself not to break down and cry. "And when you find him, give me a list of picture of his male friends."

She looked at me, her face still stoic.

"Is that all?"

I shook my head.

"When can you give me the list?"

She reached for her bag and brought out her laptop. It had a logo of our family on it.

"Give me a few minutes, Miss Belinda. I'll just access the server of your school, and from there, I will make a short list of the friends of the person you are looking for."

I sat there and closed my eyes… but then decided against it because every time I did, I could picture what happened. I suddenly had the urge to take a shower again and clean myself.

"Miss Belinda, here's a short background about the person you are looking for," Sandra said, as she handed me a piece of paper. Agad kong tinignan iyon at nalukot ko iyong papel nung makita ko iyong mukha nung isa sa mga lalaki na kumuha sa akin kagabi. "He's Jude Nathaniel Andrada, second son of the Andrada Industries. His family is affiliated with The Estrella since 1968, and has been loyal since then. He has 2 sisters, both younger than him, and both studying in Academia de Mondragon. His—"

I cut her off.

"He's currently on the run. Can you find him?" I asked her.

"There's nowhere he can hide from The Estrella, Miss Belinda," she replied. "We will find him and bring him to you. Is that all?"

I shook my head. I was barely starting.

Chapitre Dix Neuf

It had already been 12 hours since the incident, but my entire system was still shaking in anger. I was containing it, though. No one needed to see how affected I was of what happened. I... I just needed to get my retribution and I would be done with it. The only people who needed to see what I really was feeling were those animals who dared touch me.

They needed to see me wrath. They should feel it.

"Miss Belinda, Jude Andrada was last spotted at—"

I stayed in my seat.

"I don't need the details, Sandra. Just tell me when you find him," I cut her off.

And then she left me. Agad akong dumiretso papunta sa kusina para ikuha ang sarili ko ng kape. I barely slept a wink last night. Hindi ako makatulog. Tuwing ipipikit ko ang mga mata ko, agad kong nakikita iyong mga nangyari. It was as if I could still feel their touch against my skin. I could still hear them ripping my clothes. I could still remember the way they laughed when I was crying for help.

Pagkatapos kong uminom ay didiretso na sana ako sa kwarto ng mga magulang ko. I needed to know why those bastards knew about Oli's death. My parents didn't even talk about it. I cried when he died, but they didn't even offer explanations... All I knew was that his death had

already been paid, so I should just move on.

"Miss Belinda."

Napatigil ako sa pag-akyat sa hagdan nung marinig ko si Sandra. I looked at her, expecting that she'd already found the animal.

"Jude Andrada is already in our warehouse in Antipolo. Do you want to see him now?"

I curtly nodded.

"And the other thing?" She nodded. "Thank you, Sandra. I'll change my clothes first," I said and then went to my room. I didn't even bother taking a bath for what would happen later, and I opted to wear something white. I needed to see his blood on me, just like how he and his friends made me soak in my own blood and tears.

A few minutes later, I was in Antipolo. My breathing was heavy, and I was beginning to shake in anger once again. I wanted to stop myself. Anger would never do me good. Logic wouldn't work when one is angry… But I didn't give a flying fuck about logic that time. All I wanted was to make them suffer. So I let myself get angry and went inside.

Napatigil ako nung may makita akong lalaki sa gitna. He was sitting down, with a bag covering his head. He was shouting, too. Agad akong lumapit sa kanya at inalis iyong takip sa ulo niya.

"Good afternoon," I said.

Nanlaki iyong mata niya.

"I'm sorry!" agad niyang sabi.

I smiled.

"I don't need your apology," I replied. He began tearing up. Wala pa nga akong ginagawa sa kanya.

"I didn't know!"

"That I am an Estrella?" He fervently nodded. "So if I were just some girl, you wouldn't even bother apologizing to me?" I said, my anger just rising and rising because of what he said. "You're a fucking animal."

"It wasn't me! Hindi ako ang nag-plano nun!"

My lips were trembling but I managed to smile.

"We'll get to them later, Jude. But for now, let us play first, okay?"

I stared into his eyes and I could see fear. I was pretty sure that I mirrored the same expression when they abducted me. So why would I show mercy when they didn't spare me any?

"Do you remember what I offered you last night?" tanong ko sa kanya pero hindi siya makasagot. "Okay, since you're probably scared, you can't think properly. I'll answer for you," I said. "I offered to give you thrice what they gave you, remember?"

Nakatingin pa rin siya sa akin.

"Aside from our motto *In Omnia Paratus*, my parents also taught me to always pay my debts, Jude. But first, let me ask you… Who do you love most?"

His eyes widened.

"Do you love your mother, Janice, or Jenicka more?"

And then he began thrashing on his seat and shouting.

"Answer, Jude. I am not a very patient person," sabi ko sa kanya pero hindi pa rin siya sumasagot. "Cursing me won't do you any good. No one can hear you… just like no one heard me."

"'Wag mo silang idamay!" he shouted.

"Pick a name."

"They're innocent!"

"And so was I! Ano'ng ginawa ko sa 'yo?! Sa inyo?! I was trying to live a normal life, Jude! I was trying to avoid this, but you pushed me off the edge! I didn't want to do this! I didn't want to get my hand bloodied but… You fucking pushed me," I said, tears brimming in my eyes. "So, pick a name," I said through gritted teeth.

Hindi pa rin siya nagsasalita, but tears were flowing from his eyes.

I looked at Sandra who was quietly standing from afar.

"Sandra, pick a name. Olga, Janice, or Jenicka?"

"Janice, Miss Belinda," she quickly answered.

I looked at Jude, and said, "See? Mahirap bang sumagot?"

And then he only shouted louder. And louder when his sister was

brought inside.

"Paano—"

"No one can hide from The Estrella, Jude," I told him what my parents always told me. "Not even from inside the walls of *AdM*. Not when I'm specifically looking for you… them… because I made you a promise, remember? That I'd kill your entire family."

Naglakad ako papunta sa kapatid niya at saka tinanggal iyong piring sa mga mata niya.

"Hi," I greeted. "I'm sorry you had to be taken here, but your brother made me do it."

When she looked at me, I saw fear in her eyes… the way people were afraid of Avo. I wondered if I was as scary as he was.

"W-what?" she asked, her lips trembling.

"Your brother and his friends tried to rape me," I said, the words stung in my mouth. Tinignan ko si Jude. "I promised you thrice worse, Jude. You pointed a knife to my side, and for that, your sister will be stabbed. You forcefully kissed me, and for that, your sister will be kissed like a whore. You ripped my clothes, and for that, your sister will be stripped naked. You banged my head on the wall, and for that, your sister's head will be cut later. But with what you did to my mouth? Jude, you'll be the one to pay for that," I said, my lips trembling with the anger I was trying so hard to contain.

Three guys entered the room. Janice shouted in fear. Jude shouted to make them stop.

"Miss Belinda, you don't have to watch this," Sandra said.

I smiled, my lips still quivering.

"I need to see this. I need to see him pay for what he did… because only then I can rest my case," I said. "Have you found his other friends?"

"Yes, Miss Belinda. They're currently being driven here."

I nodded.

"Please bring someone to torture those animals. Don't kill them

easily. I want them to suffer until they beg to be killed. Make them tell you who asked them to do that to me."

"Noted, Miss Belinda. But what about their family?"

I stopped.

"Shoot them in the head," I answered. "Make it quick. They were just collateral damages."

I was about to leave the place when the shoutings stopped. Lumingon ako at nakita ko si Janice na walang malay sa sahig. I looked like that, too… minus the animals panicking because they discovered who they messed with.

Pagkatapos kong makausap si Sandra, ibinalik ko ang atensyon ko sa palabas sa harap ko.

"Strip her naked."

Tahimik akong nanonood at nakikinig. Jude was shouting. He was shouting the way I shouted. Sa paraan na ginawa ko pero walang nakinig.

"You fucking bitch," Jude said, crying because he couldn't do anything for his sister.

"You should've killed me when you had the chance," I spat.

"We should've raped you and killed you!"

I nodded.

"But you didn't. And now your sister paid for it."

Tumalikod na ako at akmang aalis na.

"You won't be safe!" he shouted. "You don't even know who your enemies are!"

I turned back and looked at him.

"Maybe… but they can't hide from me forever. Not when I'm looking for them."

Pinanood ko hanggang sa mahubaran ang kapatid niya.

"Make her suck you," I ordered.

"Putangina mo, Estrella! Mamamatay ka ring demonyo ka!" Jude shouted.

I faced him. "I will die one day, Jude. But today's not about me," I said

and then smiled. "Today's about me getting your mother and your sisters raped. Today's about you, Jude."

Jude's sister was kneeling and crying incessantly. Nieves, one of my men, already had his fly open. His length was in front of Janice. It was almost touching his face.

"Open your mouth, Janice," I said. Hindi siya sumunod. Tumayo ako at lumapit sa kanila. Hinawakan ko ang mukha niya at pilit na ibinuka ang bibig niya at ipinasok doon ang kahabaan ni Nieves. Isinubsob ko ang mukha niya kagaya ng ginawa sa akin ng kapatid niya sa baril nito.

Tuwing gabi, napapanaginipan ko pa rin. How he touched me, how he made me suck his gun. Even this wasn't payment enough for everything he made me go through.

Walang sapat na kabayaran sa kababuyan na ginawa niya sa akin.

"Suck it like a whore that you are," I said, repeating what they told me.

Itinulak ko ang ulo niya hanggang sa mabulunan siya. Naka-tingin ako kay Jude habang ginagawa ko iyon.

"Masaya ba, Jude? Gagawin ko rin ito sa nanay mo at sa isa mo pang kapatid."

At minura niya ako. Walang magagawa ang mga salita niya. Kahit saan siya magtago, hindi ako titigil hanggang hindi ko nararamdaman na naka-ganti ako sa mga pambababoy na ginawa nila sa akin.

Nang halos masuka na si Janice, pinatigil ko na siya. I made her bend down.

"You will be fucked like a whore that you are," I told her while looking at Jude. His face was contorted in anger. "Hindi man *Dieux* si Nieves, pero sigurado ako na masasarapan ka."

I took three steps back and watched her get fucked. She was crying. I was crying.

But not everyone who asks for help will get the help they asked for.

Sometimes, life is cruel.

And I was cruel.

"Mahirap ba, Jude?" I asked.

"Isa kang demonyo!"

Natawa ako. "Ako? Ako pa ang demonyo sa ating dalawa?" hindi ko makapaniwalang tanong. "You planned to rape me!"

"At hindi namin itinuloy!"

"It doesn't change the fact that you planned to rape me!"

He wasn't even sorry.

Bakit ako maaawa sa isang tao na hindi man lang nagsisisi sa mga ginawa niya?

"Inosente ang kapatid ko!"

I smiled at him and looked at Janice who was still being fucked hanggang sa mawalan siya ng malay.

"I know... but too bad she's related to someone like you," I said and then called Sandra. "Bring in Jude's mother. It's her turn to be fucked."

Agad akong umuwi sa bahay. I rummaged through my mother's things until I found her sleeping pills. I wanted to sleep. I felt tired. I didn't want to have dreams… Gusto ko lang magpahinga dahil pagod na pagod na ako.

And then I closed my eyes… and finally rested.

A few hours later, I woke up, went down, and found Sandra waiting for me.

"Done?"

She nodded.

"The bodies are being disposed as of the moment," she informed. "They were tortured but it looked like they didn't also know who was behind the attack, Miss Belinda. All they knew was that it was a *Dieux* in *Academia de Mondragon.*"

Was it Ella? Was that her revenge for what I did to Avo? Hindi ba

dapat na matuwa siya dahil wala na kami ni Avo?

"There are five *Dieux*," I mumbled.

"Yes, Miss Belinda. I suggest that we do not do anything until we're sure. We do not want to kill the wrong person. It will cause havoc in the entire community."

I nodded. She was right. I didn't want another wreckage… what happened three years ago shouldn't happen ever again.

"What should I do?" I asked her.

"We already managed to infiltrate the firewalls of *AdM*, so it would be easier to track the movements of the *Dieux* through the cameras," she informed.

But there were too many loopholes that the cameras wouldn't capture. I was locked inside a freezer, and there was no trace. Alam ko na kung sa labas lang kami magmamatyag, wala kaming mapapala. These people weren't like Jude… they were like… me. I shouldn't belittle them. Whatever I have, they have, too. Whatever I can do, they can do, too.

"I'll go back in," I said. "I'll contact you through phone calls again, Sandra. Change my code. And don't ever tell my parents about this."

She nodded.

"Before you go back in, Miss Belinda, we'll give you a tracking device. Just push the button when you're in danger."

May kinuha siya sa brief case niya, at saka inabot sa akin.

"This is the symbol for peace, Sandra. It's kinda ironic, don't you think?" sabi ko habang tinitignan iyong bagay na binigay niya sa akin.

"That's all we hope for in this world, Miss Belinda," she said. "Be careful. You're dealing with powerful people like you are."

She was right… but my family was more powerful. And I would make sure to make them see that.

I waited for a few days. I waited until the stitches on my forehead was done. Sandra suggested that I wait until my bruises were gone, but I needed to be back on Friday. There was the party. I needed to go to that party.

Came Friday, I went back inside. I hid the bruises on my face with concealer. I looked the same, except on the inside. The school looked the same—it still looked like a prison harboring future criminals. I would never feel safe inside this place. No one should.

Tahimik akong naglakad papasok, at dumiretso sa admin building. Kinausap ko sila para palitan ang ID ko.

"What made you change your mind?" Madame Jovelyn asked.

I looked at her.

"I am an Estrella, why should I hide it?"

She smiled, pleased with my answer, and gave me my new ID.

"I will be transferring to the dorm of the *Dieux*. Have people transfer my things," I told her. Tumayo na ako para umalis. Marami pa akong gagawin.

"I know you breached the firewall," sabi niya sa akin.

I turned around and looked at her.

"And if you're smart, you won't do anything about it," I said.

She just smiled, and nodded.

"You're just like your brother."

My brother was a good person. Oli was different from me… And that was why he got killed.

Agad akong nagpunta sa bilihan ng damit. I bought myself new clothes. I was done pretending to be a *Deuxième*. I was ready to embrace my real status.

When the night came, I changed my clothes. I didn't go to the dorm

yet. Agad akong dumiretso sa function hall kung saan gaganapin ang party. The music was loud, the people were having fun. And when I entered, they all looked at me like I was a freak show. Bakit? Dahil iniwanan ko si Avo? Dahil akala nila, isa lang akong *Duexième* na tanga na iniwan ang isang *Dieux*?

Hinanap ko ang pwesto ng mga *Dieux*. Agad akong nagpunta roon. They were all staring at me, murmuring as I made my way to my proper place.

"What are you doing here?" Ella spat. "You're not with Avo anymore. You're not welcome here."

I looked at Avo's eyes. His eyes still held all the answer he was trying to hide from me… but I'd break him. I'd break those walls and see for myself everything he was hiding.

I'd strip him naked of all his lies.

"But I am, Ella," I said and took my seat. I sat in the middle of Lorenzo and Night. In front of Avo.

"What?" naguguluhan niyang tanong.

"I am Belinda Ophelia Estrella, *Dieux*," I introduced myself, the way I should've before.

IN·OMNIA·PARATUS

Chapitre Vingt

I looked at their expressions. Tinignan kong mabuti kung paano sila aakto sa sinabi ko. Sandra warned me to be extra-careful… that deciding to come back to this place was almost like waging a war against all their families. I didn't like war. I didn't like chaos. But I also didn't like people not paying for what they did. And whoever ordered my assault needed to pay the debt.

"What?" Ella said, her face contorted. "What the fuck are you saying?"

"That I am also a *Dieux*? Didn't you hear the first time? Bingi ka na rin ba, alongside being pathetic?"

Napatayo siya at saka malakas na hinampas iyong lamesa.

"You bitch!"

Hindi ko siya pinansin at saka binalingan si Night. My chest was heaving in pain with the proximity. I felt uncomfortable having someone so near… But I needed to pretend that I was alright. I needed to show them that the assault didn't do anything to me. That rather than destroying me, they just unleashed the devil inside me.

After all, even Lucifer was once an angel.

Huminga ako nang malalim at pinalakas ang loob ko bago ko kinausap si Night. Siya lang ang pwede kong kausapin sa lamesa na 'to. I still wasn't talking to Avo. I needed to plan my move first. I realized that

he was the deadliest man in this academy and I needed to take that seriously. Lorenzo was not an option, as well. I was not in the mood to play sarcastic with him. And I didn't even need to consider Fuji. My mere existence was enough to put him in a sour mood.

"Are you done with this party? I need help to fix my things," sabi ko sa kanya. Night's expression remained unfazed. Hindi ko alam kung dahil ba hindi ko lang talaga mabasa ang iniisip niya, o kaya naman ay dahil alam niya na talaga dati pa... He had always been helpful. At sinabi niya sa akin iyong tungkol sa *Memento Mori* kahit na nung nagpapanggap pa akong *Deuxiéme*. It was a possibility that he already knew of my real identity even before divulging it.

"Why?"

"I'm transferring to the house," I informed.

"What?!" Ella shouted.

Binalingan ko siya.

"Will you please stop shouting? Nandito lang ako sa harap mo," naiinis na sabi ko sa kanya. Ang lakas ng boses niya. Binalingan ko si Night. "So? Do you want to help?"

Night looked at me, as if he was studying me.

"Something's changed."

"Nothing changed, Night. I just realized I needed to play the game."

'In order to find the culprit,' I reminded myself. It was my goal. I needed to find the one who did that to me. I should always remind myself why I came back to this horrid place... At hindi ako dapat magpa-apekto sa bawat tingin ni Avo.

Tumayo na ako at nagsimulang maglakad. As I was walking outside, I saw Laurie looking at me. I wanted to come and talk to her... but I didn't want to trust anyone. I was done with that. I was done trusting anyone. I was sure she'd understand.

Tahimik lang akong naglakad hanggang sa makarating ako sa harap ng tirahan ng mga *Dieux*. It was still as massive like the first time I saw it. I didn't want to live here, but I was left with no choice.

"Are you sure you're going to live here?"

I faced Night and nodded.

"Bawal ba?"

"Mapipigilan ba kita kapag sinabi kong hindi?"

I shook my head.

"Then let's get moving before Ella arrives," he said. Naninibago ako na hindi siya nagtatanong.

We started our way to the house. I was about to open the door when he held the knob at the same time. I flinched when his touch grazed my skin. My heart jumped inside my chest, and started racing. I closed my eyes and calmed myself. I should stop reliving the memories. I wouldn't be able to function, if I would
flinch at the slightest touch.

"S-sorry," I quickly apologized.

Naka-tingin siya sa akin… at ngayon, alam ko na alam niya na na mayroong mali. But he didn't say anything.

"I don't know what happened to you," he said, looking straight into my eyes. "But if you want to be taken seriously, never apologize. Correct your mistakes, but never apologize."

I pursed my lips.

"Thank you."

"And never thank anyone."

"Are you telling me to get rid of my emotions?"

He looked at me, and nodded.

"Feelings are weakness, Estrella. If you want to win the game, set aside your feelings."

Mas lalo akong napatingin sa kanya. Night… surely knew a lot of things. I should keep him close. Lalo na at nakikita ko na paparating na sila Avo. Bigla akong kinabahan. I was scared, but I needed to pretend that I was strong.

Nung malapit na sila Ella, bigla akong hinatak ni Night sa tabi niya.

He whispered, "You don't have to be strong all the time. You just have to look strong." And then he put his hand on the small of my back. My system screamed, but I held it all in. "*In Omnia Paratus*. Ready for anything. Show them, Estrella."

Nanlaki iyong mga mata ko na napatingin sa kanya. He knew about my family! He fucking knew! Ang dami kong gustong itanong kay Night pero hindi ko nagawa dahil nasa harap ko na sina Avo, Fuji, Lorenzo, at Ella.

"Are you fucking serious?!" sigaw ni Ella nung makita niya iyong ilan sa mga gamit ko na nandito pa sa labas. "Bakit ka titira dito?!"

Huminga ako nang malalim. Was she this slow? Ilang beses ko ba na ipapaliwanag na *Dieux* din ako?

"Because I belong here," I calmly replied. No emotions. I shouldn't show them anything. That would be a weakness. "This is my place. I am taking it."

I picked up my luggage and began walking inside, with Ella shouting behind me. I couldn't blame Night if he's outside all the time. Kung ako man ang araw-araw makakarinig sa sigaw ni Ella, malamang ay nasa labas din ako palagi. I was about to go inside and look for a vacant room when she slapped me.

"Who do you think you are?! Bigla ka na lang pupunta dito at aasta ng ganyan?!"

Napakuyom ang kamay ko sa ginawa niyang pagsampal sa akin. Agad akong pumasok sa loob at mabilis na hinanap iyong kwarto ni Ella. I opened the door and went in. Hinanap ko iyong damitan niya at mabilis kong pinagbabato. I was supposed to nicely ask for a vacant room, but she left me with no choice.

Ella's jaw dropped.

"You're kidding me." I faced her, my face void of any emotions. "You bitch!" sabi niya nung makita ako na binabato lahat ng gamit niya sa sahig. I began rummaging through her things and found her jewelry collection. Agad kong binuksan iyon at saka inihagis sa sahig. One of her

necklaces broke and the diamonds spread on the floor. Hindi pa ako nakuntento at saka humanap ako ng gunting at isa-isa kong ginupit ang mga damit niya.

She was about to charge at me when I pointed the scissors at her.

"Slap me again and I will stab you with this scissors, Ella. 'Wag mo akong subukan," I said through gritted teeth. I was tired of being pushed around by her. If she slaps me, I'd slap her back and slam her head against the wall. Hindi na ako papayag na gawin niya sa akin iyong mga ginagawa niya noon. I was done playing the underdog.

Agad niyang tinignan si Avo at Fuji, asking for help.

"Tell her to stop, Avo..." she pleaded. She held on to his arms. "Avo, please... She can't do this! She can't throw me out of my own room!"

Avo was only looking at me. He wasn't saying anything, but his eyes were boring a hole in me. And still, I couldn't read him.

"Fuji?" Ella said nung hindi sumasagot si Avo.

"Just... just give this room up. It's not worth it," Fuji replied. Tinignan akong mabuti ni Fuji. His eyes screamed anger, but he wasn't saying anything about it. Night was right. Everything was just a facade. I should play the game like how they're playing it... I shouldn't be at a disadvantage.

Agad na hinila palabas ni Fuji at Lorenzo si Ella. Night looked at me and then started to walk away... leaving me with Avo.

"We're not yet done," sabi ni Ella pero hindi ko na siya pinansin. I was tired with her antics. And I just wanted to rest. But how could I? How could I with Avo here with me?

"May sasabihin ka ba?" I said. "Dahil kung wala, you can leave. I want to rest."

But he didn't budge. He just stayed there, standing and looking at me.

"Boe..."

I shot him a look.

"Belinda, Avo. That's my name." Because Boe died when I did all

those horrible things.

We stared at each other, with no one wanting to give up. But I wouldn't. I held the gaze for as long as I could. He should know that I wasn't the same girl he used to play for a fool. It had only been days... but those days changed me. And the things I did... I could never take them back.

I was just like them now. I was no better than them.

Morning came and I decided not to eat breakfast with them. I seriously didn't want to deal with Ella. Even her face was enough to destroy my day. I decided to stay inside the room and just arrange my things. At magplano kung ano ang dapat kong gawin. I still wasn't familiar with this house. Ilang beses pa lang akong nakakapunta dito kaya hindi ko pa rin alam ang pasikut-sikot.

It was already three in the afternoon when I decided to go out. It was a dead time. I was sure that they're done eating. I was famished. Pagpunta ko sa kusina, agad kong naabutan si Night. He was by the kitchen island eating a spoonful of Nutella.

"Night..." I called his name. He shot me a glance. "Are there things I needed to know?" Kumunot ang noo niya. "I mean, as a *Dieux*..."

There were things that only them knew. That was one of the reasons why I decided to reveal my real identity. I should be able to use all resources. I was sure that *Memento Mori* was but one of the many things that they get to enjoy.

"Ah, yeah. One, we rule this school," sabi niya at napailing lang ako. "Two, there are lots of hidden passages everywhere. And three, the walls have ears."

Napa-kurap ako sa sinabi niya. Kahit na may sinabi siya, parang wala akong naintindihan.

"You don't need to ask me things, Estrella. You'll learn along the way," sabi niya. Alam ko na wala akong mapapala kay Night. Kung ayaw niyang sabihin, hindi niya sasabihin… Might as well investigate myself. Pero bago iyon, kakain muna ako dahil nagugutom na ako.

"There are no food," he said even before I could open the ref.

"What?"

"Ella threw away all the food when you burned her things."

Napaawang iyong labi ko. She did that?!

"I seriously can't live with girls. Ella is headache enough, tapos dumagdag ka pa," sabi niya habang nilalagyan ulit iyong kutsara niya ng Nutella. "If you want to eat, go outside."

Natigilan ako. I couldn't. I still couldn't go outside alone. Pakiramdam ko ay bigla na lang may hahatak sa akin para dalhin ako sa kung saan. I was trying to fight the fear but it kept on creeping back into my system. Iniisip ko pa lang ay parang sumisikip na ang dibdib ko.

"A-ah. Sige, may aayusin pa ako," I said and then made my way back to my room. I should just wait until dinner. May dadating naman para magluto.

My stomach was already hurting from hunger but I was fighting it. I really couldn't step outside. Gusto ko pero… hindi ko magawa.

"Hey."

Napatingin ako sa pintuan. Night was standing by the door, holding his jar of Nutella and two spoons.

"I don't know what your problem is, but you want to eat? I can't finish this alone."

"You want to share?"

He shrugged.

"It's about to expire tomorrow, so might as well share with you," he said and then went inside. Binigay niya sa akin iyong kutsara at saka naupo sa kama. He was at least a foot away from me, and that made me calm down. I didn't want him too near. It would feel like suffocating. "Bakit ka nandito?" he asked.

"I belong here."

"I know. But what changed your mind?"

I kept silent. I didn't want to discuss about it. My chest felt like exploding just by thinking about it.

"How long have you known?" I asked him instead.

"What? That you're a *Dieux*?"

I nodded.

"Since the beginning."

Napaawang iyong labi ko, "H-how?"

My parents kept me in hiding for so long. Majority of the world didn't even know that I exist. Paano niya nalaman iyong tungkol sa tunay kong pagkatao?

"Oli told me about you," he said. I held my breath. "He used to live here. Before he died." He knew my brother… "And you're his spitting image, you know?"

Mas lalong umawang ang mga labi ko.

"Kilala mo siya?"

He nodded.

"I used to know him, but Avo knew him better. He was his best friend."

Chapitre Vingt et Un

I held my breath. I clenched my fist. I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Best friend? He was best friends with Oli? Bakit hindi ko alam? Bakit hindi niya sinabi? He knew me even from before? Kaya ba parang kilala niya na ako dati pa, dahil sa kapatid ko? I had all these questions inside my head, but I couldn't verbalize any. My chest was tightening.

Night looked at me.

"Why are you telling me these?" I said, my voice barely audible.

"So you'd stop avoiding him."

"Who? Avo?" I asked.

He nodded.

"He's the answer to your questions, Estrella."

I pursed my lips.

"Keep your friends close, your enemies closer," he said, gazing straight into my eyes.

I stared back. He should know that I was not about to back down. Lalo na ngayon na mas marami akong nalalaman tungkol sa nakaraan. I didn't even know how my brother died… I wasn't given any details. Basta isang araw, sinabi sa akin na patay na siya… And then no more questions were asked. Because that was how I was supposed to live. Without questioning what's already given… but instead, to make it even.

And they said that Oli's death had already been paid... pero bakit may gumugulo pa rin sa isipan ko? Something didn't add up.

"Are you saying that Avo's the enemy?"

Night smiled.

"Who knows?"

"Are you messing with my head?" I hissed.

"Am I important to you that I get to mess with your head?"

Mas lalo lang kumuyom ang kamao ko dahil sa sinabi niya. He was still the bastard I knew. Hindi ko pa rin siya kayang pagkatiwalaan. I should always be aware of Night and his intentions.

"If you're done eating, you can leave," sabi ko at saka tumayo para pumunta sa walk-in closet. I decided to dispose half of the things I owned. I wanted to go out and buy things for myself, but somewhere inside me, I was still apprehending. Hindi ko alam kung kailan dadating iyong panahon na makakalabas na ako ng hindi kumakabog iyong dibdib ko. I couldn't live with this fear inside me. I wouldn't function if every time I close my eyes, the scenes would keep on flashing back.

I was concentrating on arranging my things when I felt a hand on my shoulder. I almost jumped out of my skin. I turned and saw Night's bewildered expression. By now, I was sure that he was already real suspicious. Sinusubukan ko naman na maging normal, na umakto ng normal... but it was harder than it sounded.

"What?" I asked him, in order to hide the erratic beating of my heart. He said it so himself. I needed not to be strong... I just needed to look strong. And I would use every fiber left in my body to hide the fact that I was weak. That every night, when I close my eyes, I could still remember everything. There was no way out. There was nothing for me to do but to live with it... And until I could accept that, I would have to pretend that nothing was wrong... when in fact, everything else was.

"Oli's old room is the one beside Avo's."

Napatingin ako sa kanya.

"Why?"

"Why?" he reiterated.

"Why... are you doing this?"

He smiled, but his smile was everything but innocent.

"I'm messing with your head."

What Night said bothered me. I had thought about it a countless of times. What did he have to gain by messing with my head? Was it just entertainment for him? Masaya ba na nakikita na mas naguguluhan ako dahil sa mga sinasabi niya? Hindi ko talaga siya maintindihan. And the more I tried to understand him, the more bizarre he just gets.

It was already past 7 when my stomach grumbled again. Buong araw ay Nutella lamang ang laman ng tiyan ko. I already felt nauseated from the hunger, and I just couldn't stand it anymore. Nagdesisyon ako na lumabas at bumaba. I'd rather have my day destroyed by Ella than to starve myself again.

Pagbaba ko, agad ko silang nakita. They were complete. What a sight.

Agad kong nakita si Ella na napairap nung makita ako. Si Lorenzo, walang pakielam—he was engrossed with whatever he was reading. Fuji was glaring at me... And Avo was staring at me. Even from a distance, I could feel the words he wanted to say to me. Words he couldn't say because even before he begins, I already took a step away from him.

And Night? Oh, he was enjoying this. I could see from the smug smile on his face.

Pumunta ako sa bakanteng upuan. There was no plate prepared for me.

"You must feel how unwelcomed you are, right?" Ella said.

"If I managed to throw you out of your own room, what makes you think that I couldn't get a fucking plate?"

How would I manage to stay in this godforsaken place for the rest of the school year? How would I restrain myself from strangling Ella? Kasi

kahit na pinagpapasensyahan ko siya dati, naubos na 'yun. I wanted to break that pretty neck of hers.

"Can we have another plate here?" biglang sabi ni Lorenzo. Ibinaba niya iyong libro. "Can we just eat in silence? For a change?"

Ella gritted her teeth, and I smiled in victory.

"Thank you, Lorenzo," I told him and smiled.

The food were served and I ate in peace. If Ella wouldn't mess with me, I wouldn't shot back at her. She's the one who kept on bothering me. My attention wasn't even on her. It was on Avo. Kanina ko pa napapansin na tinitignan niya ako... I wanted to grab the opportunity to talk to him.

Hindi ko alam kung ano ang nararamdaman niya para sa akin. I didn't even know if he really loves me like he claimed. With what I learned about Avo, everything he told me became questionable. Every action he did for me become tainted. Did he do all of that because he loves me... or because of Oli?

I had so many questions... and the only way I could get answers was if I'd let him back into my life. And I was figuring how I'd do that without him noticing my true intention.

Nung matapos na kaming kumain, agad akong tumayo.

"Thanks. I enjoyed the food," I told the chef, and then I began to walk towards my room.

Papunta ako sa kwarto ko nung mapatingin ako sa kwarto ni Avo... at sa dating kwarto ni Oli. My feet brought me there. Naka-tingin lang ako. Hindi ko alam kung papasok ba ako. Oli and I... we weren't exactly close. My parents already shipped me to Japan before we could even forge a strong bond. But I did talk to Oli once in a while. I knew he's a nice guy. Not exactly tailored for the kind of life the world was imposing on us. Kaya hindi na rin ako nagtaka kung bakit siya namatay. Kind people wouldn't last in this kind of life. I should know.

"Boe."

Biglang lumakas iyong tibok ng puso ko. Hindi agad ako nakagalaw

sa kinatatayuan ko. But maybe he felt the same… because silence enveloped us for a while.

"Can we talk?"

I braced myself.

"About what?"

"Can you look at me first?"

I clenched my fist.

"What do you want, Avo?" kalmadong sabi ko. I didn't want to lash out on him. I didn't want to blame him. Nothing was his fault. It was my decision to go out that night… It was my fault that that happened to me. I would gain nothing if I were to blame him for something that he had no control over…

But how could I get pass this feeling? That every time I would look at him, I would remember that night? How would I get close to him, if that's what goes on in my head whenever he's near me?

"Talk," he said.

"We're talking," I answered.

"No. I am talking. You're listening to refute whatever I have to say," he replied.

I sighed. He took a step closer. I held my breath. Alam ko na napansin niya iyong reaksyon ko… I saw pain shot across his eyes when I almost flinched at the proximity.

"With Ella…" he began. I didn't say anything. I wanted to hear this. "She's special to me—"

I cut him off.

"First, Avo, you don't tell your ex that your other ex is special to you. If for one second you think you're all that, let me tell you that I won't lower my standards just so I could fit you. At kung wala ka ng sasabihin, pwede na ba akong umalis?"

Nakatingin lang ako sa mga mata niya. There was that frustration again. Sino ka ba, Avo? Ano ba ako sa 'yo? Why were you punishing yourself to be with me if you're still in love with Ella?

Nagsisimula na sana akong maglakad nung magsalita siya.

"Why are you here, then?"

Napahinto ako.

"I belong here."

"Why only now?"

I stopped to find the answer inside me... but I got none. The only reason I was here was to find the answers to my questions... And to punish the person responsible for the horrid things that happened to me. And I couldn't tell him that. I couldn't tell the enemy about my plans. Because until I found the real culprit, everyone's my enemy.

"Because it was too idealistic of me to think that I could have a better life by pretending to be normal."

I hated it when he looked at me like that.

"And living here is normal?"

I shook my head.

"But I have a better shot at a semi-decent life. At least."

Tumalikod na ako at nagsimula ng maglakad nung magsalita siya ulit.

"I may have lied about things," he said. "But I was telling the truth when I said that I like you."

I turned and looked at him.

"Yeah... Too bad."

I didn't think I could feel anything anymore. Not until I was done with my unfinished business.

The entire Sunday was spent plotting my next moves. I knew I needed to get close to Avo again, but I was finding it challenging. I couldn't even look him in the eyes. I couldn't stand too near. Hindi ko alam kung paano ko gagawin iyon kung iniisip ko pa lang na malapit siya ay para na akong malalagutan ng hininga.

And when Monday came, I was in no better shape. The people were looking at me, probably still in the state of shock nung malaman nila na isa rin akong *Dieux*. I didn't have spare time to humor them. I badly wanted to finish my business here so that I could go outside. Another second inside this hellhole would mess with my sanity.

There were still a few minutes left before the class officially started. Nanatili ako na nakaupo sa isang concrete bench sa harap ng building. There were people around me. I liked the security of having eyes looking at me.

"Good morning."

I glared at him.

"Are you following me?"

Tumawa naman siya. He's eating lollipop again.

"We're classmates."

"I know. How unfortunate."

Naupo siya sa tabi ko. My heart started to race because he was too near.

"How can you get close to Avo if you keep on shutting him down whenever he tries to get near you?"

Hindi ako makasagot. How would I explain to him that I was still in the state of being traumatized? That I couldn't have anyone near me? That every time someone tries to get too close, suddenly, I couldn't breathe? That even being around people made me want to vomit and cut myself? How do I explain that to him?

"Does he repulse you?"

I kept silent.

"You don't even have to like him, Estrella. You just have to play your cards right."

"Why do care so much?"

He looked at the sky.

"I told you I have a different way of showing my care," he said and then smiled at me.

He's really fucked in the head.

It was sooner than I expected. During our class, we were given paired tasks. And since Avo's my seatmate (and because Night practically sold me out), si Avo ang naging ka-partner ko. And we were now face-to-face. Nowhere to run now.

"If you're not comfortable, I'll just do it alone," he said.

"No, it's okay," I replied. It's a research paper. I couldn't leave him to do it alone.

Tahimik kaming gumawa. I was reading while he was beginning the introductory part of our paper. Good thing we decided to make it thematic, so that we wouldn't be too forced to work alongside. Even if he was only in front of me, it was still too close.

"It's already late. Go to sleep," he said. We were already in the study room of the house. Hindi ko akalain na gagabihin kami dahil sa ginagawa namin. I had been testing Avo's patience and I knew that he's wavering. I didn't want him to waver. I needed him to wait… hanggang kaya ko na ulit ang lumapit sa kanya.

Napatingin ako sa kanya.

"We're not even halfway done," I stated. It was already due tomorrow.

"I'll finish this."

"Do you want me to leave you alone?" tanong ko sa kanya.

He looked at me and sighed.

"What do you want from me, Boe? I talk to you and you push me away. Now, I'm giving you a way out and you get frustrated at me. What do you want?"

Napaawang iyong labi ko. Hindi ko alam kung ano ang sasabihin sa kanya.

"Just tell me what you want from me," he said, exasperated. "Don't

keep me second guessing all the time. I'm not your toy."

At saka siya tumayo at iniwanan ako. Akmang susundan ko pa sana siya nung mapansin ko na may nahulog sa sahig. It was a photo dated three years ago—a few days before Oli's death. And at the back of it, 'Summer of 20xx' was written—at may tatlong lalaki na nakatalikod. But I knew that Oli was one of them… and Avo was the other one. Pero sino iyong isa?

Chapitre Vingt Deux

It had been over a week since I started living with the *Dieux*, but I still felt out of place… Not that it mattered, because I really didn't plan on staying here for too long. Once everything had been taken cared of, I would be gone. I never really liked this place, and I was certain that I would never come to. Everything about this place screamed danger… Hindi ko nga alam kung bakit tingin ng mga magulang na mas mapapabuti ang mga anak nila dito.

And whenever I'd see Avo on the halls, he'd only look at me briefly before proceeding with whatever he was doing.

"Who are you?" I said as I continue to look at the picture on my hand. Ilang ulit ko na itong tinitignan pero hanggang ngayon, wala pa rin akong ideya kung sino ang tao sa larawan. I was sure that Oli and Avo were in the picture. Kahit nakatalikod sila ay makikilala ko sila… What was killing me was not knowing who the other guy was.

Tahimik akong nakaupo sa damuhan habang naglalaro iyong mga kaklase ko. We were having our PE class right now. And as a *Dieux*, I had the privilege to skip the playing part. There was too much skin contact. At nung akala ko ay nakaligtas na ako, nakita ko na naman si Night na papalapit sa akin. I immediately stood up and began walking the opposite direction. I didn't want to talk to him. Kagaya nga ng sabi niya, he was

doing nothing but to mess with my head.

He was not only a psycho, but also a devil's advocate. I was sure that he's having all the fun in the world lalo na ngayon na halos wala ng araw na tahimik sa bahay ng mga *Dieux* dahil kay Ella.

Naglakad lang ako ng naglakad. I was slowly becoming comfortable walking outside alone… Maybe comfortable was too strong a word. But it was a start, at least. Nakakalabas na ako kahit papaano. And the necklace Sandra gave me provided some kind of assurance. Na kapag napahamak ako, someone would come to my rescue.

While I was enjoying my peace, bigla kong nakita si Avo. He was walking and people were going out of their way to make way for him. He just held that kind of authority. At ako naman… sinundan siya.

I hated it when he talks to me… but I hated it more when he ignores me. Maybe because he made me used to his attention. And now that he's pretending that my existence was null, I was suffering withdrawal.

Hindi ko alam kung saan pupunta si Avo pero sinundan ko siya. I was clutching on my necklace the whole time. May magkamali lang talaga na humawak sa akin ng walang pahintulot ko, I'd raise hell.

Pumasok si Avo sa isang maliit na building. He swiped his ID and it opened. I was hesitating if I'd follow him… but what was the use of me revealing my true identity if I wouldn't be able to take advantage? Kaya naman pumasok na rin ako. And it was just a huge room… with TV screens everywhere.

"Shit," I whispered to myself.

Realization hit me. It was really fucking one of them who rigged the CCTVs that night. It was all pre-planned. The assault was pre-meditated. Bigla na namang bumalik ang galit sa puso ko.

I took a step forward. I looked at the screens. Every part of *AdM* was covered… and yet every time something happened to me, suddenly these cameras were of no use. Napakuyom ang kamao ko dahil dito. They're really messing with me.

"What are you doing here?"

Napatigil ako sa pag-iisip dahil kay Avo. He was standing in front of me. Hindi agad ako nakasagot. What was I to say to that? Na sinusundan ko siya? And that I just learned that one of his friends was behind the assault that pushed me to kill innocent lives?

"I..." I trailed. "I was checking the exclusive places for *Dieux*."

I didn't know if he believed my lame excuse, but that was the least of my concerns now.

"There's nothing in here for you to enjoy," he said.

"Why are you here then?" I shot back.

"Why do you care?"

I clenched my jaw. He's playing hard to get now?

"Bawal ba akong magtanong?"

Tinignan niya ako nang mabuti.

"Stop acting like you care, Boe. I have no time for your games," sabi niya at saka nagsimulang maglakad. Nilagpasan niya ako.

Was he really... done with me?

The thought hit me. Something inside me ached... but more so, realization dawned me. Hindi ko pwedeng hayaan na mawala sa akin si Avo. He's the key to all my questions. I don't know if I should trust Night... pero alam ko na kailangan ko si Avo. Everything I had been through would be senseless if I'd lose him.

"Avo."

Saying his name took more courage than I thought it would. I never really liked begging for anyone's attention. I was raised to take what I thought was rightfully mine. But the game I was playing required more than just useless pride. Wala akong mapapala kung magmamalaki ako. I was playing with enemies whom I couldn't see. I needed to up my game.

And I needed all the strength I could muster... especially when Avo's looking at me like that. And he wasn't even saying anything, but he could make my knees go weak.

"Why?"

He only kept on staring.

"Why… did you do that?"

He didn't answer. I didn't know what to say anymore. How do you get back someone whom you had pushed before?

"Did you really just play me? Was it fun?" I asked.

I looked at him. He clenched his jaw.

"Do I look like I have the time to play, Belinda?" he said, his voice sent down chills down my spine. It was the first time he called me like that… and he made my knees buckled. And when he took a step closer, I hitched my breath.

"T-then why did you do it?"

Another step closer.

"What's the use of answering? You wouldn't even bother to listen."

I wanted him to stop getting too near. Hindi na ako makahinga.

"I… I'll listen," I said, in a desperate attempt to lure him in again. I closed my eyes and muttered Night's words… I don't need to be strong all the time. I only need to look strong. "So… talk."

Avo stared at me. Even with him this close, I still couldn't read him. There was so much hiding behind his eyes… Nababasa kaya siya ni Ella? Kasi ako, kahit ano'ng gawin ko, hindi ko magawa. And it was disheartening.

I was waiting for him to talk, when he made my heart jump out of my chest. He trapped me in between his arms, forcing me to look at him.

"Why?" he asked.

"Why?" I returned.

"Why are you asking me this now?"

I knew he'd ask that question. Sandra warned me. Night warned me. I was not playing with people lower than me. I was playing with equally dangerous people… and with Avo, I just had to play my card.

"You hurt me," I answered.

Maybe he didn't love me like Ella… but he liked me. He cared for me. And I should use that. Or exploit that. Anything to get me what I wanted.

His eyes softened, and even then I knew I already got him.

"I like you, Avo... Even when you hurt me, I still like you," I said, staring intently in his eyes. I willed myself to cry, and tears began to brim. I knew I got him. "Why did you have to do that? Bakit mo ako sinaktan kung si Ella pa rin ang gusto mo?"

I was breaking him. I could see it in his eyes.

"Did you really even care about me, Avo?" I said, my voice croaked. "Or was it all a game to you?"

Avo looked at me, like he was contradicting himself. What are you hiding, Avo? I had all these questions inside me. I needed to get him back in my life. I needed access in his life. So even if touching him made my heart painfully race inside my chest, I held his face.

"Explain, Avo. I'll listen."

Nakatingin siya sa akin, at saka dahan-dahan na ibinaba iyong braso. I was no longer trapped.

"What do you want to know?"

I smiled.

"Everything," I replied. "Why did you tell me you wanted me the first time you saw me?"

Would he tell me about Oli? Or would he tell me another lie?

"You reminded me of someone," he said, looking intently into my eyes. My heart started beating erratically. It was Oli.

"Who?" I dared ask.

"Just someone."

I pursed my lips.

"Someone special?"

"A close friend," he shortly replied. He was being honest, but he was omitting the things I wanted to know. But I shouldn't push too hard. "You just reminded me when I saw you."

"Just because of that, nagustuhan mo ako?"

He looked at me again. I hated that look. Na para bang gusto niya talaga ako. Alam ko naman na hindi. Like me, he was just playing the game... And I didn't even know whose side he was in.

"If I say yes, you won't even believe me."

I smiled.

"You're right. Pero bakit mo iniwan si Ella?"

Avo smiled. For the first time, I saw him smile. Hindi ko alam kung ano ang mararamdaman ko… but everything monumentally stopped. And the only thing I could focus on was his smile.

"It was an order."

And then he turned his back on me and started walking away.

Pagdating ko sa bahay, wala pang tao. I didn't know if it was a good thing… I didn't like it when it's too silent. Alam ko na kahit nasa lugar ako ng mga *Dieux* ay hindi pa rin ako ligtas. Mas lalo na ngayon na nalaman ko na malaki pala talaga ang kontrol nila sa mga nangyayari sa loob ng eskwelahan na 'to.

I was about to go inside me room when I noticed Laurie standing by the door.

"Laurie?" I asked. She looked at me. "Why are you here?"

Hindi agad siya naka-sagot.

"Are you looking for Night?"

She blushed. Unbelievable. Laurie's blushing because of Night. Sa ilang linggo na magkasama kami ni Laurie, alam ko na matapang siya. She didn't even shed a single tear when her family died… and here she was, blushing profusely because of some guy.

"I don't think he's here," I answered. "But I can stay with you while you're waiting."

Naupo kami. I sat a bit far from her. I hope she didn't notice.

"Kayo na ulit?"

She shook her head.

"Ah… bakit ka nandito?"

"We'll hang out."

"And by hang out, you mean…"

Laurie looked at me and smiled. I didn't like the smile. She deserved so much more.

"Laurie, I know it's really none of my business but—"

But even before I could tell her what was on my mind, she cut me off.

"Night and I, it's never going to happen, Estrella. He's Night. He's an heir. I'm contented that I'm getting whatever I can get from him. I can't be too greedy."

I didn't know what to say to that.

"Is he really worth it?"

She smiled and nodded.

"He's worth it," she answered. "There's more to him than what you know, Boe."

But I wasn't interested to know more. What I knew of him was enough to creep me out. Pero bago ko pa man masabi iyon, dumating na si Avo. He looked at me, and I stared as intently. Were we okay? Pwede ko na ba siyang kausapin ulit? Hindi ko alam kung ano ang susunod kong gagawin… but I needed to make my move. Before Ella sabotages everything.

"Laurie… were you here 3 years ago?"

Napatingin siya sa akin.

"Did you know Oli?"

Something felt different. She nodded.

"What happened when he died?"

"I wish I can tell you more… but it was a secret within the *Dieux*, Boe. All we know was that he died when he sneaked out."

Napaawang iyong labi ko.

"He died outside?" hindi makapaniwalang tanong ko. It was unlike Oli. Yes, we weren't close, but I knew him enough to know that he was never the one to disobey our parents' orders. Alam ko na hindi siya papayagan na lumabas dito.

She nodded.

"Oli and Avo sneaked out… But only Avo returned alive," she said. "It was a news then. If someone of lower rank dies or goes missing, it wasn't much of a big deal… But when a *Dieux* dies, imagine the havoc it caused back then."

Biglang sumikip iyong dibdib ko.

"I think it was the time when Avo and Ella started the on and off phase of their relationship," she continued. "That's the only thing I know. But if you really want to know what happened, you should ask Avo."

I stood up and said goodbye to her. And started to walk my way to Avo's room. I really needed to up my game. Even if being near him was enough to suffocate me.

Chapitre Vingt Trois

I didn't even bother to pep talk myself when I braved Avo's room. I just barged in there, not knowing what could happen next. I knew myself. If I overthink this, I'd just end up making excuses for myself. And I was done making excuses. Everything around me just kept on pointing at Avo. That it was him who was the real center of the game, and not me.

Agad siyang napalingon sa akin nung marinig niya ang pagbukas ng pinto.

"What—"

Hindi niya naituloy ang sasabihin. I cut him off. I needed to tell him this before I change my mind. Kailangan kong maisagawa ang plano ko bago na naman ako panghinaan ng loob... Because as much as I hated Avo for lying to me over and over again, I still couldn't change the fact that he knew things I wanted to know. And for that reason alone, I needed him.

I looked at him and willed myself to cry.

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm sorry I broke up with you."

As tears began to cascade down my face, I knew that I got him. Even after lying to me, when he said that he genuinely cared for me, maybe he was telling the truth. Kitang-kita ko na apektado siya sa pag-iyak ko. Kahit hindi ko man mabasa si Avo, ngayon ay alam ko ang

nararamdaman niya… And I shall use that to my advantage.

"I'm sorry, Avo…"

I kept on sobbing and crying. Avo stood in front of me. I could see the walls breaking.

"I was just really hurt… and I did that to protect myself. Kasi paano kung si Ella talaga ang gusto mo? Paano ako?" I explained in between sobs. Halos hindi na ako maka-hinga dahil sa pag-iyak na ginagawa ko. Hindi ako tumigil sa pag-iyak. I didn't care if I couldn't breathe. I needed to break the wall that I built when I broke up with him. I needed to climb that wall, if I couldn't break it. That's the only way around this.

Nilapitan ko si Avo. I caressed his face.

"I'm sorry…" I whispered.

He was just staring at me. I cried harder. I needed his forgiveness. I needed him to let me inside his life again.

"Stop crying," he said after a long time. Tinignan ko siya habang panay pa rin ang tulo ng luha ko. I didn't know that I could cry this hard… And I didn't know that I could use this card against him.

"Are we… okay?"

Slowly, he nodded.

"Talaga?"

He sighed.

"Yes," he replied. "So, please stop crying." Pinunasan ko iyong luha ko pero patuloy pa rin siya sa pagtulo. Avo sighed. "Please… I don't like to see you cry."

Medyo natawa ako sa sinabi niya.

"It's not like I can will myself to stop crying. Sandali lang, mauubos din 'to," I said.

Tumayo si Avo at lumapit sa mini-ref niya. He got a bottled water and gave it to me.

"Thank you," I said and smiled. I tried to open the bottle, but for some unexplainable reasons, I couldn't. Baka isipin niya na masyado na akong umaarte para mapansin niya ako. Sinubukan ko talaga na buksan iyong

tubig pero ayaw magpabukas! What the heck was with that bottle?! Bakit ayaw magpa-bukas?! "Thanks," I replied when he got the cursed bottle from my hands and opened it in one try.

"How do you survive in this world if you can't even open a damned bottle?" he said, shaking his head.

I smiled.

"That's why you're there for me… right?"

I was trying my luck. I was pushing my luck.

"Right," Avo said in resignation. I still could feel a bit of uncertainty from him but I could work on it.

The days after, I had been trying my best to get closer to Avo. It was hard. It was hard to get near him when his guards were always up. Hindi kagaya ng dati… But I didn't have any time for regrets. Kailangan kong mas galingan ang ginagawa ko. Baka hindi na sapat na nagpapaawa ako sa kanya. I didn't know how to do this anymore. Kapag sinusubukan ko na lapitan si Avo, lagi siyang nakakagawa ng paraan para lumayo. I was lucky if I get five minutes alone with him.

And I couldn't get inside his room. Palaging naka-lock. Hindi ko talaga mabuksan, lalo na at ginawa yatang life mission ni Ella na tignan lahat ng ginagawa ko… The only way I could get in was if Avo would let me. And by the way things were going, I'd say that I wouldn't see myself inside his room anytime soon.

Napabuntong-hininga na lang ako sa sobrang frustration.

"This is your fault, you know?" I whispered to the air. I was in Oli's old room. I tried to look for anything useful pero wala akong makita. But still, I enjoyed staying here. Baka kahit papaano, mas makilala ko siya. Hindi kasi kami masyadong nakakapag-usap. He was sent here to study, while I was sent to Japan to be isolated. I could count the times we talked using my fingers.

"If you didn't die, wala sana ako rito... Hindi sana nangyayari 'to..." I sighed. "I don't think I'm strong enough for this, Oli. And I am scared for myself... I could feel myself changing. And it's scaring me..."

I bent my knees and hugged them.

"I just wish you're here to help me..."

Sinubukan ko ulit na tignan ang mga gamit ni Oli pero wala pa rin talaga akong makita. Even pictures, wala... It's like they wiped every memories of Oli in this room. Anything that I could use to unearth what happened in the past. Kahit isang litrato lang para malaman ko kung sino ang kasama nila ni Avo sa picture, wala akong makita... And it only fueled my desire to get inside Avo's room. I had this nagging feeling inside me na nandoon lahat ng kailangan ko.

And I also wanted to know Oli's relations to everyone. Sino ba ang mga kaibigan niya? Sino ang mga kaaway niya? Bakit sinabi ng mga magulang ko sa akin na bayad na ang pagkamatay ni Oli? Who paid for his death?

I had all these questions inside me. I badly needed an answer... I closed my eyes pero bigla akong nagulat nung may magsalita. Biglang tumibok ang puso ko.

"What the fuck!" malakas na sabi ko nung makita ko si Night na parang kakagising lang. Seriously, he kept on emerging from nowhere! He's so freaking creepy! "Have you been spying on me?!"

He yawned and even stretched! Gulu-gulo pa ang buhok niya at mukhang nag-enjoy talaga siya sa pagtulog niya!

"I was here first," sabi niya. "Do you have food?"

Kunot pa rin ang noo ko.

"Wala," I quickly replied. "Why are you even here?"

Ginulo niya ang buhok niya—maybe an attempt to tame his bed hair, pero mas lalo lang gumulo.

"Trying to sleep."

"May kwarto ka naman."

"Yeah, but Laurie's there. And I don't have the energy to sleep with

her."

Tinignan ko siya nang masama.

"You're a pig. Laurie deserves better. Hindi ko alam kung bakit nagtatyaga siya sa 'yo," I honestly told him. Bakit ba nagtatyaga si Laurie sa kanya? She could definitely get someone better than Night and his creepiness. Was it because he's a *Dieux*? But Laurie's not like that! Sa panahon na nakilala ko siya, alam ko na wala naman siyang pakielam sa rank...

Night's smug smile made an appearance again.

"Nasa performance 'yan," he replied, wiggling his eyebrows. "Anyway, I'm really hungry. Wanna grab a bite with me?"

Agad akong umiling. No way I'd eat with this animal.

"And we can talk about how you can get close to Avo again," he said with a meaningful smile. "And besides, I'm your only friend here in this house."

"I have Lorenzo."

"Don't kid yourself. Lorenzo's got his own world. He couldn't care less about you and you know it."

"I hate you."

He laughed and then put his hands inside his pocket.

"It's alright. It's not like I love you," he replied and then started walking.

Lumabas kaming dalawa at nagsimulang maghanap ng kakainan. Dahil napipilitan lang naman ako na samahan siya, pumayag siya na ako na ang mamili ng kakainan namin. I learned that Night abhorred Thai food so that's where we went. I didn't even enjoy Thai food myself, but anything to torture Night. Para sa pang-iinis niya sa akin at sa paglalaro niya kay Laurie.

"I should've just asked Laurie," he said as he scanned the menu.

"Quit toying with Laurie. She doesn't deserve this."

"She knows what she's getting in when we first did it. She's not a child, for god's sake. Don't be too overprotective of her feelings."

I glared at him.

"Wala ka ba talagang puso?"

"I have… but I don't really use it," he said and then sadly smiled at me. "I don't think I'd be able to sleep at night if I let my heart take over my life."

Hindi ako nakasagot dahil naiintindihan ko siya… kahit ayoko, naiintindihan ko si Night.

"And I'm not a hypocrite like you are," he said. I held my breath. "I do my own crimes, Estrella. I kill with my own hands."

I gritted my teeth.

"I am not a hypocrite."

He smiled.

"You sure are. You don't like to kill, but you order people to kill for you. If that isn't hypocrisy, then what do you call it?"

I hated that fucking smile.

"I'm not judging you. We got to do what we have to do," he said. And then the playfulness in his aura was gone. He looked at me straight in the eye. "You want to get back into Avo's life? Sleep with him."

Nanlaki iyong mata ko.

"What?!"

"He likes you. He may lie about a lot of things, but believe him when he tells you that he likes you. Exploit that feeling."

"You're a pig!"

Dumating na bigla iyong pagkain namin. Muntik ko nang ibato sa kanya iyong plato. How dare he suggest that! Ano ba ang tingin niya sa akin?! And how would I even sleep with Avo?! I couldn't even let anyone touch me without making me want to kill myself!

"You can't play the damsel in distress card again, Estrella. And your tears can only get you as far. So if you really want to make it work, I'm just laying down the suggestions."

Tinignan ko ulit siya nang masama. If only looks could kill, he'd be dead by now!

"You're a pig," I said it again.

"Time is ticking, Estrella. Your birthday's near."

Nanlaki ang mga mata ko. Paano niyang nalaman iyon?

"How—"

But even before I could voice my question, he answered it for me.

"I told you. You're the center of this game… so play it good and play it smart."

Chapitre Vingt Quatre

There was a party. And a lot of alcohol involved. Hindi ko alam kung bakit biglang nagkaroon ng party dahil wala naman ito sa original na schedule ng school year. But when I saw Night wiggling his eyebrows at me, I knew then that this was his plan. That opportunistic bastard. Why did he keep on insisting that I sleep with Avo? Mamamatay ba siya kapag hindi ko ginawa?

"Avo doesn't get drunk easily so put this in his drinks," sabi niya at saka nilagay sa kamay ko iyong isang bote.

"You're asking me to drug him?!" hindi makapaniwala ko na tanong.

He shrugged.

"It's not a drug. It's herbal," he replied.

"Why don't you try it yourself first bago ko gamitin kay Avo?" I sarcastically said. I didn't trust Night. I wouldn't even dare trust him my life. He's sketchy in all level. He's the personification of the very word. Bawat galaw niya ay nakakapagduda. Once I was done with Avo, I couldn't wait to get my hands on Night. I'd strip him of all the secrets he's keeping.

If I were the queen of this game, I was damn sure that he's the one playing the game. He knew too much. He controlled too much.

"Why? Are you going to take responsibility if I get horny because of

this?" he asked, wiggling his eyebrows again.

"I'll chop your dick before you can even touch me," sabi ko bago ko siya tinalikuran. I was in no mood to play with him. Tuwing kausap ko si Night, pakiramdam ko ay nauubusan ako ng lakas. He had the capability to drain my energy without even trying. And he was always appearing before me. I was starting to believe that he was stalking me.

I stalked off and went to the library to study. Pre-final exams were approaching and I needed to take care of that first. Maayos naman na kami ni Avo. Unlike before, we're now in talking terms… though he still wasn't as warm as before. I was feeling frustrated because I was slowly losing ideas on how to make him see me again. It wasn't as easy as before… And though it pained me to admit it, Night was right. My tears would only get me as far.

When I was done studying, pabalik na ako sa bahay ng mga *Dieux* nung makasalubong ko si Cathy. I was about to approach her when she turned the other way around. Agad na kumunot ang noo ko. I was sure she saw me. Iniiwasan niya ba ako? Dahil ba *Dieux* na rin ako kaya pakiramdam niya ay hindi niya na ako pwedeng kausapin at lapitan?

This was all too depressing. I couldn't wait to go out of this shithole.

Pagdating ko sa bahay, si Lorenzo lang ang naabutan ko.

"They're all out?" I asked. He simply nodded. I sat on the seat adjacent to him. Katulad ko kasi ay hindi kumportable si Lorenzo kapag may malapit sa kanya. I wasn't like this before. I missed being able to stand close to people… Now, I just wanted distance. It was tiring.

"Hey…" I called.

"If you're going to ask me if I know where they are, I don't."

I chuckled.

"That's not what I was going to ask," I said. He closed his book and looked at me. "Palagi mong binabasa iyan," I pointed out.

"It's my favorite."

"Maganda?"

Iniabot niya sa akin iyong libro na The Catcher in the Rye.

"Are we finally friends?" I said, teasing him. He kept on insisting that we're not friends, but when I needed help, he's always there. Siguro sa bahay na 'to, si Lorenzo o si Avo lang ang pagkakatiwalaan ko ng buhay—if ever I were forced to make a choice. Si Night ang huli kong pagkakatiwalaan. He may seem to play it cool but I knew he's quite dangerous.

"I don't do friends," he replied.

"Why? Wala ka ring puso kagaya ni Night?"

"Friends betray each other. I don't like that kind of drama."

"Have you been conned all your life? Why do you have that kind of mentality?"

I knew I was pushing my luck already. Lorenzo's life was a closed book, yet here I was, trying to steal a glance. Something horrendous must have happened for him to be this closed off. Like what happened to me… It only takes a pull of the trigger to permanently cause scar.

But when he looked at me, I felt chills.

"Why? Do you think you can trust your friends?"

I pursed my lips.

"No," I replied, breathing hard. "I don't trust anyone."

I didn't even trust myself.

"Good. Because no one here deserves to be trusted."

Tumayo na siya pero bago pa man siya makatayo, agad kong nasabi iyong tanong na matagal ko nang gustong malaman.

"Do you know my brother?" I asked, hopeful that he's willing to shed a light. Like the other *Dieux*, Lorenzo had been attending *AdM* since he was young. Alam ko na kilala niya si Oli. Everyone knew Oli but the *Dieux* knew him best. He lived here. He talked to them. He was closest to them.

So if anyone could tell me what really happened to him… ang mga *Dieux* iyon.

"Yes," he replied, his voice barely audible.

"Are you close?"

Umiling siya.

"Si Avo ba talaga ang pinaka-nakakakilala sa kanya?"

He nodded. Night was right. Avo was his best friend.

"Do you know what happened the day he died?"

Lorenzo looked at me. I knew he knew something. Ano ba ang pumipigil sa kanila para sabihin sa akin? Pakiramdam ko ay pinaglalaruan lang nila ako. Sinasabi nila sa akin ang mga dapat kong malaman pero hindi sapat para matuklasan ko lahat. I felt like I was on the verge of everything and yet, I couldn't understand it all.

Pakiramdam ko ay unti-unti nila akong binabaliw.

"He left with Avo… and then somebody else returned."

My breathing became uneven.

"That's not what Night told me…" I whispered. Sabi niya, si Avo daw ang bumalik mag-isa. Sabi niya, umalis ang kapatid ko at si Avo, pero si Avo na lang ang bumalik.

Lorenzo slowly lifted the side of his mouth.

"Out of the ten things Night say, only one is the truth."

Hindi ako mapakali. Kung hindi si Avo ang bumalik… sino? Pakiramdam ko ay malapit na talagang sumabog ang isip ko sa dami ng gusto kong malaman. At mas lalo lang akong nababaliw dahil nasa harapan ko lang ang tao na makakasagot sa mga katanungan ko.

Avo was quietly eating while Ella was sitting beside him. He was paying her no attention, but Ella didn't seem to mind. Now that I looked at them, I didn't think Avo's in love with Ella. It wasn't the same… Si Ella lang ang gumagawa ng lahat, while Avo quietly accepted everything. Mas lalo lang akong naguguluhan… Avo told me that Ella's special, pero bakit ganoon ang pakikitungo niya sa kanya?

"Let's go to the party together?" Ella said.

"Alright," Avo quietly replied.

Hinawakan ni Ella iyong braso ni Avo at saka hinilig iyong ulo niya sa balikat nito. She's fucking in love with him that it made me pity her. Why was she pushing herself to someone who was clearly done with her? Didn't she have any self-preservation?

"And then after..." Ella said and then whispered something in Avo's ear. "It's been a while, don't you think?" sabi niya at saka hinawak-hawakan iyong braso ni Avo.

I was close to cutting Ella's head off her neck when the devil arrived again.

"How's my favorite girl?" he whispered on my ear. I could see Avo looking at us. That was the only reason why I allowed Night to stand so close to me. "Change your mind yet?"

I glared at him.

"I'm not a hooker, Night. And I'm not that desperate," I told him before I stalked off. I was tired of him forcing me to sleep with Avo—as if it's the only way to get closer to the truth.

Hindi ako ganoong klase ng babae. And I didn't think Oli would appreciate it if I'd sell my body just to shed light to what really happened to him. After all, I was his little sister.

I spent the whole afternoon reading Lorenzo's book that I didn't notice the time. Bigla ko lang naalala 'nung mapatingin ako sa orasan. Mabilis akong naligo at namili ng susuotin. I didn't know what Avo liked but I settled on wearing a sleek black dress. It accentuated my neck and I also wore the choker Sandra gave me. Nandun iyong pendant na maaari kong pindutin kapag nalagay na naman ako sa panganib.

The party would start from 10pm to dawn. It was making me heavy with worry. Hindi ko kayang umuwi nang mag-isa sa oras na iyon. I needed to have Avo with me. I needed to have a concrete plan to pry Ella away from him.

Pagkalabas ko, agad kong hinanap si Night. And although he's probably the most devious human I knew, I couldn't deny that he's a genius when it came to plotting against people. And that night, I needed him to get Ella as far away as possible from Avo.

When I found Night, he was with Laurie. Napa-ngiti ako sa sarili ko nung makita ko silang magkasama. Although Night's as filthy as an animal, if Laurie loves him, there's nothing I could do but to be happy for her. After all, love is blind... siguro. Akmang lalapit sana ako sa kanila nung mapansin ko na sumisigaw pala si Laurie. She's also on the verge of tears. Nagbe-break na naman ba sila?

If this was another one of their love-drama, I didn't want anything to do with it... But at the same time, it's about Night. And anything involving him was enough to stir the curiosity
inside me. Kaya naman dahan-dahan akong lumapit sa kanila.

"This is crazy even for you, Night!" Laurie said, her frustration was very evident.

Night stayed quiet for a while... and then he spoke. He stared at Laurie, and I felt chills crept up my system. He's scary when he's like this.

"Stay out of it."

Akmang aalis na si Night nung hawakan ni Laurie iyong braso niya.

"This is dangerous..." Laurie said, tears brimming.

He slowly detached her fingers away from his arm.

"It's not," he said, his voice low and utterly dangerous. "If you keep quiet and stay out of it."

Bigla akong nagtago nung naglalakad na papalapit si Night. I held my breath as I tried to stay hidden. Ano ang pinag-uusapan nila? It obviously didn't sound like a break-up! Night was hiding something and Laurie knew what it was! God, the things I needed to know just kept on piling up! Malapit na talaga akong mabaliw kapag wala man lang akong nalaman na kahit na isa sa mga 'to!

Nung tuluyan nang makaalis si Night, nagdalawang isip ako. Gusto

kong malaman kung ano ang pinag-usapan nila, pero sino ang tatanungin ko? I couldn't ask Night... Kung totoo nga ang sinasabi sa akin ni Lorenzo, walang silbi kung tanungin ko man si Night. He'd just end up lying to me. Pero si Laurie? I consider her as a friend... but I knew I didn't have her loyalty. It's with Night.

Mas lalo lang akong naguluhan.

The party was already in full blast when I arrived. I didn't even know why I was here. I had no plans... and I absolutely had no regards to Night's suggestion. I wasn't as immoral as he was. He had already embraced immorality and he had no qualms about it. He's seriously the most fucked up person I knew, and that says a lot.

Tahimik lang ako sa lamesa na nakalaan para sa *Dieux*. Everyone was here except for Night and Fuji. Ella was being disgusting with Avo again. Kulang na lang ay bulagin ko ang sarili ko dahil sa nakikita ko.

"Where are you going?" I asked Lorenzo when he stood up. Siya na nga lang ang kasama ko dito, iiwan ko pa ba siya?

"Getting drinks," he replied.

"Can you get me some, too?" I asked. Might as well get drunk kaysa masuka ako sa dalawa sa harapan ko.

He shrugged, but I knew Lorenzo. He'd get me something to drink. Tamad lang talaga siyang magsalita.

Habang naghihintay ako, biglang umalis si Ella papunta sa impyerno sana. I was left with Avo. He was looking at me. I raised a brow.

"The world is too small for the three of us," I commented. "Kapag ba may bagong *Dieux*, gagawin mo ring girlfriend agad?"

His jaw clenched. I smiled inside. I still had a hold of him.

"You broke up with me," he said.

"And I already said sorry."

"Does that fix anything?" he retorted.

I scoffed.

"Was I the one who lied between the two of us? Ikaw pa talaga ang may ganang magalit?"

Akala ko ay mauuwi na talaga kami sa pag-aaway. Mabuti na lang at dumating na sa wakas si Lorenzo. Agad kong inagaw iyong dala niya at ininom iyon ng diretso. I turned away and I was about to thank him when my heart almost jumped out of his cage.

"You motherfu—"

Hindi ko na naituloy ang sasabihin ko nung magsimulang tumawa si Night. This spawn of evil! Agad akong napatingin sa ininuman ko. Was this spiked?! Shit! Mabilis akong tumayo at saka naglakad palabas. I couldn't be near anyone right now. That asshole! Was he desperate to make me sleep with Avo na gagawin niya sa akin iyon?!

Halos magtatakbo ako papunta sa bahay para sana magkulong sa kwarto ko nung bigla kong marinig ang pangalan ko.

"We're not yet done talking," Avo said, holding me by my arm. I tried to yank it off but he was much stronger than me.

I breathed. I could slowly feel the effect sipping through my system. I'd kill Night when I see him again!

"Let's talk tomorrow," I said. Sinubukan ko ulit na tanggalin iyong hawak niya sa akin pero hindi ko magawa. Napapikit ako. I was starting to feel hot all over. God, Night! I'd break your neck and chop your favorite part when I see you!

"No," Avo said, his voice low.

Tinignan ko siya nang maigi.

"Let go of me," I replied, closing my eyes. I didn't like the effect of his touch. I didn't trust what I was feeling. "Please."

But instead of letting me go, hinatak niya ako palapit sa kanya.

"Stop asking me to let you go," he whispered. He was so close. Too close. My breathing began to harden. I couldn't even look him in the eyes for I knew that my self would betray me. "I tried. So hard."

As I began to get lost looking at those orbs, he held my face.

"You never let me finish talking," he breathed. "You always wanted to have it your way."

Those lips. They're begging to be kissed.

"Now, you shut up and let me talk."

I absentmindedly nodded. I was focused on his jaw and how I wanted to trace it.

"Ella's special because she's my first friend—"

I cut him off. Again.

"I don't want to talk about her."

"But I need to explain myself—"

"Enough talking," I said as I reached for his lips and kissed him. God, I couldn't control myself anymore! I felt so hot! As I kissed Avo, I couldn't help but silently curse Night in my mind. It's his fault! Everything that I was doing was his fault! I wasn't as randy as this, but he made me do it again! Fucking asshole! I'd castrate him!

Avo tried to stop me, but he couldn't. I kissed him so hard that he ended up moaning in my mouth. I knew he gave in.

"Stop fighting this," I whispered against his mouth.

He looked at me. He was as drunk as I was.

"You'll regret this."

"Probably," I murmured. "But that's for tomorrow to worry."

As mouths were entangled, he rested my back against the tree and wrap my legs around his waist. I was already getting lost with his kisses and his touch when I was reminded that cameras were looking at us. I stopped kissing him so he began to shower kisses on my neck.

"Let's go somewhere," I said, my eyes closed as I enjoyed the sensation he was giving my neck.

"Where?"

"Somewhere private," I breathed hard.

Avo stopped kissing me and then held my hands. Fingers were intertwined as we made our way to his room. Pagpasok namin, agad akong hinalikan ni Avo. I responded fervidly. My fingers were entangled

with his hair while his hands were caressing my waist and my back. I didn't know how we managed to get to his bed without tumbling down.

He continued to kiss me, his tongue tracing every contour in my mouth. All I could do was to moan. And moan some more.

His expert hand snaked inside my shirt and then began to knead my breast. I bit his lower lip when the sensation was too much for me to bear. Tinanggal niya ang suot ko at mabilis na sinakop ng bibig niya ang dibdib ko.

"God," I whimpered when his mouth enclosed over my nipples. His teeth was tugging my bud and all I could do was to moan in pleasure. I could feel the heat in between my thighs. My hands went in front of his pants and I rubbed him with urgency.

"Fuck," he said, his mouth still tasting my nipple.

"Take this off," I moaned, still rubbing his bulge. I could feel how hard he was... God, I wanted this so fucking bad.

He quickly removed his belt and got rid of his pants. I pulled his boxers off using my feet. I could feel his length brushing against my leg.

"If you want to stop, now's the best time," he said as I rubbed his length against my leg. He moaned. God, it sounded so delicious.

I felt hot all over.

I looked him in the eyes. I reached too far. There's no backing down.

"I'm yours, remember?" I said as I pulled him down and kissed him again. I wrapped my thighs around his torso as I felt his length poking the entrance of my core. I rocked my pelvis up to motion him to take me.

"Shit," he whispered against my neck. The head of his length was already inside me. I could feel a searing pain but I didn't want him to stop. I wanted him to go on.

I wanted all of him inside me.

"I can take it," I moaned.

He gently pushed himself inside me until I felt something inside me tearing. Tears brimmed in my eyes.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

I nodded, brushing the tears away. "I can manage," I said and then hugged him tighter. We stayed still for a minute, letting me adjust to his length. He was huge and it was a pain to accept all of him. But I was so hot. Pakiramdam ko ay mababaliw ako kapag hindi namin ito ginawa.

"Move," I whispered when the pain subsided a little.

'And fuck you, Night,' a small part inside me said.

Avo began to slowly thrust himself inside me. Slowly... until he began to wreck me with every thrust.

"Shit!" I said as I tried to match his pace.

He didn't stop. He pumped harder. He thrusted deeper. Pakiramdam ko ay mababaliw ako sa pinaparamdam niya sa akin.

His hand reached in between us and his thumb flicked my clit.

"Holy shit," I moaned as something inside me exploded. I felt like I could see stars. Pero hindi tumigil si Avo. He continued to thrust. He didn't stop. Nanghihina na ako dahil sa naramdaman ko ngunit hindi pa rin siya tumitigil.

And it seemed like he wouldn't stop.

He flipped me over while he was still inside me. I saw how his length was still inside me... how he was still connected to me.

Something inside me burned.

"Ride me," he moaned. His hands were on the sides of my waist.

"What?" I asked, still drunk from the feeling he made me feel. I felt like I was in heaven. This drunken euphoria.

"Fuck me, Belinda," he said and then motioned me to go up and down above him.

He was looking at me with those eyes... like he was as drunk as I was.

It gave me the courage. I pumped up and down. Hindi ako tumigil hanggang hindi niya nararamdaman ang pinaramdam niya sa akin. I rode him so hard until he was able to see the sun and the stars.

I was still riding him when he rose up and kissed me. His tongue was again inside my mouth and his left hand was kneading my breast. His right hand was massaging my clit and I felt like going crazy.

I forced myself not to come. I wanted to make him come first. But it was almost impossible. His fingers were driving me crazy.

And I came again.

Hinihingal ako habang nakaupo pa rin sa kanya.

"You still hasn't come, yet," I said, panting for air.

He flipped me until my behind was facing him. His hand was on my ass, massaging it.

"The night is still young," he said and then I felt him inside me again.

Chapitre Vingt Cinq

My head felt like it was being pounded by a thousand hammer. I was still silently cursing Night as I tried to get my limbs disentangled from Avo's. I avoided staring at his sleeping facade. I felt guilty for sleeping with him. Something inside me was breaking but I didn't have time for feelings. Palagi kong inaalala lahat ng sinasabi nila sa akin. Trust no one. I trusted no one... not even myself. Most especially when my own feelings were betraying me.

Last night was something I wanted to remember and forget... but as much as I tried to forget it, everything was already buried in the deepest parts of my mind. Alam ko na hindi ko na matatakasan iyon... not even when go far away from this horrid place.

Avo quietly stirred.

"I'm sorry," I whispered against his sleeping face. I tried to caress his face, but I reprimanded myself even before I could. I should remember what I came here for. Agad akong tumayo at tahimik na nagsimulang maghanap ng kahit na ano... I just needed something, anything that could give me a clue.

Nagsimula akong tignan ang mga drawers ni Avo pero wala akong nakitang kakaiba. There were pictures there, but nothing was giving me anything. Ilang beses na akong nakapasok sa kwarto ni Avo dati pero hindi ko binigyang pansin ang mga nakikita ko dati... I wasn't curious

before. I didn't have any agenda before. But now that I was seeing it in a different light, I couldn't help but wonder.

It felt different. Everything in this room felt detached from the Avo I knew.

Isa-isa kong tinignan iyong mga litrato na nakalagay sa isang photo album na nasa pinaka-ibaba ng drawer. There were pictures of Ella and Avo. They looked so happy… and it was giving me a strange feeling. Something was wrong.

"Who are you…" I mumbled as I stared at the picture. It didn't feel like the Avo I knew. Tama kaya si Lorenzo? Iba nga ba ang bumalik na Avo? Pero kung ganoon, sino ang kasama ni Oli? At ano ang nangyari sa kanya?

I was about to scan the remaining pictures when I heard Avo calling my name. I froze on the spot.

"Boe…" he called.

Kinalma ko ang sarili ko at mabilis na itinago ang photo album sa ilalim. I turned around and faced him. And awkwardly smiled.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I… was looking for my shirt," I lied. Sobrang lakas ng kabog ng dibdib ko. I was still clutching the linen against my naked body. Sa sobrang pagmamadali ko kanina na makapaghanap ng ebidensya ay nalimutan kong magbihis agad.

Avo motioned for me to go back to the bed. I gave in. He looked too fucking good in the morning. I wanted to slap myself for thinking this way. He's the enemy, but how could I defeat the enemy when he looked like this in the morning?! Damn Night! Kasalanan niya ang lahat ng 'to!

"It's still early. Let's sleep some more," he mumbled as he nuzzled my neck.

I closed my eyes as the sensation settled in. *'Don't you dare, Estrella! He's the enemy!'* I reminded myself.

"It's already 9," I replied as I bit my lower lip to stop myself from making any noise that might just encourage him to continue what he was

doing.

"I don't care," he answered and pulled me back to bed with him. "We barely slept a wink. Let's sleep some more."

And I frigging couldn't do anything because he placed his arms on my stomach and entangled his legs against mine.

"Good night," he said as he snuggled against me.

A few hours later, I finally convinced Avo to let me go. Not after sleeping with him again. Na gusto kong sabunutan ang sarili ko. I kept on convincing myself that I shouldn't but every time he touched me, I just couldn't resist.

I was still blaming Night for everything!

Paglabas ko sa kwarto ni Avo, didiretso na sana ako sa kwarto ko nung makasalubong ko si Night. He was looking at me up and down and wiggling his eyebrow.

"Someone's doing the walk of shame," he said with a sly smile. "Up all night?"

I glared at him and was about to punch him in the face when he took a step back and started chuckling.

"You smell like Avo, Estrella," he said as he wrinkled his nose. "Take a bath first before touching me."

I clenched my jaw.

"You fucking drugged me!" I hissed.

"And you enjoyed yourself, you're welcome," he replied. "Where's Avo? Still asleep?"

"Don't you dare go near me. I'll fucking break your neck!"

Tatawa-tawa lang siya.

"You don't have your cronies here with you, Estrella. I know you. You don't do your dirty works."

Bakit ba si Night ang nakikita ko kapag ayaw kong makita ni anino niya?! Was he born in this world to infuriate me?! And to further confuse me every step of the way?!

"I might just start with you," I threatened him. He just shrugged at me and then went away while holding his apple and Nutella. God, I wanted to strangle him so bad!

After thoroughly taking a bath, I remained in my bed. My whole body felt sore, and I didn't have the energy to go outside. Nagugutom na ako pero mas lamang iyong pagod ko kaya tiniis ko na lang iyong gutom. I was still thinking that banning phones in this place was a freaking bad idea. They could just jam the signal from the outside, but at least, we should be given the liberty to call people inside.

My stomach was already grumbling, but my legs were still limp. I didn't think Avo was— God, I shouldn't even go there! Hindi ko dapat iniisip iyong mga nangyari kagabi! It was distracting me, and I couldn't afford to be distracted. Hindi ngayon. Mas lalong hindi ngayon kung kailan nararamdaman ko na
malapit na.

Papatayo na sana ako para pilitin na makarating sa kusina nung biglang bumukas iyong pinto. It was Avo.

"Sore?"

Bigla akong namula. Was I the only virgin in this house? Bakit ba masyado silang kumportable na pag-usapan ang ganitong mga bagay?

"I brought you food," he said as he placed the tray on the bedside table.

"Thanks," I replied, still not able to look him in the eye.

I was about to reach for the spoon when Avo took it.

"Ako na," I said when he attempted to feed me. "Kaya ko namang kumain."

"I know," he replied. "But I want to do this for you."

Ganito ba talaga? Dahil masyado siyang natuwa kagabi kaya sobrang bait niya sa akin? Paano pa kaya si Night kay Laurie? Naaalala ko na naman iyong sinabi ni Fuji dati na nilulumpo raw ni Night si Laurie… Animal talaga.

As Avo began to feed me like I was an invalid, I debated with myself. Should I ask him? Would he be honest with me if I asked him about Oli? Would he spare me no details if I asked him about what happened the day Oli died? Would he explain to me everything that's bothering me?

"What are you thinking about?" he asked when he noticed that my head was flying off to somewhere.

I looked at him, weighing what my next move would be.

"Nothing…" I lied. It still wasn't the time. I still needed to lure him in further. "Are you free later?"

He nodded.

"I have a final exam on Self-Defense. Pwede mo ba akong turuan?"

The last time was such a disaster. Lalo na ngayon na kalat na rin na isa akong *Dieux* kaya alam ko na talagang si Ella ang makakapareha ko para sa finals. And there's no way in hell that I'd give her the chance to kick my ass—not when I was dying to get my hands on her. She'd been making my life here in the house a living hell! Kahit pagkain ko ay sinasabutahe niya. She's a pain in the ass! No wonder Lorenzo would do anything just to shut her up. Night had been using Ella and her craziness to make Lorenzo do things. Sa sobrang ingay ni Ella, pumapayag si Lorenzo para lang mapatahimik siya. She's that loud.

Avo nodded.

"Were you seriously hurt the last time?"

I shook my head.

"I terrorized her, remember?"

Natawa siya ng kaunti.

"Yeah…" he trailed. "But we'll train together. I don't like it when you're hurt."

I smiled at what he said, but still I couldn't help but think how he wasn't there when I needed him most… Pero pilit kong tinanggal sa isip ko iyon. It was already a done deed, and what mattered was how I'd resolve it. At iyon na nga ang ginagawa ko ngayon. So I did my best and plastered a smile on my face.

"Protective," I commented.

Ibinaba niya iyong kutsara at saka hinawakan iyong pisngi ko.

"I'm protective of what's mine."

I raised a brow.

"I'm yours?"

He smirked. God, those lips! Why did he have the reddest lips of them all?! Mas daig niya pa ang babae!

"I think we already made sure of that last night, wife," he said and then leaned in. He began to kiss me, and I didn't even try to fight back. I kissed him, too, because I liked it. It was Night's fault. I tried to avoid this, but now that I tasted it, I was suddenly always craving for it. He awoken my desire for Avo.

Avo began to lay my back on the bed while continuously kissing my neck. Damn, that felt good!

"I thought you were feeding me," I managed to mumble as he began to unbutton my pajama top.

"I thought so, too," he said and then my top was discarded. Who knew he was talented in the art of discarding clothes! "Change of agenda."

I closed my eyes as his kisses began to travel down to my chest. Holy god.

The sun already set when Avo decided that he's tired. He was sleeping in my bed. Tinignan ko nang mabuti iyong mukha niya at napa-buntong-hininga. I felt bad for doing this… para kasing kasama ko lang siya dahil

may kailangan ako. It didn't even need to reach this far, but what more could I do? I already went down this path, and I knew there was no turning back.

Nung masigurado ko na tulog na siya, agad akong bumalik sa kwarto niya para maghanap ulit ng mga bagay na pwede kong magamit. I just needed something... a clue. Something that would put everything together.

I began to search the other side of his room. Wala akong makita sa mga drawer niya. Everything there was useless. Nothing gave anything away. Nagsimula akong tignan iyong mga libro niya. I was patiently checking each books, because maybe something was there... Hindi ko alam. I was just merely pushing my luck. Ayoko kasi na isipin na para lang sa wala lahat ng mga nagawa ko.

Nasa pang-apat na libro na ako. So far, the books were normal... They were books... Pero itong nakita ko.

Alistair Yoseff Ostenhaimer

My heart began to pound inside my chest. Agad kong binuksan ang bawat pahina ng libro, hoping to get something that might shed a light. Nanginginig ang mga daliri ko habang binubuksan ang mga pahina. I was close to tearing the book apart pero wala akong makita! Nothing besides that damned name! Mas lalo lang nadagdagan ang mga kailangan kong malaman!

Nung wala akong makita sa libro na iyon, agad kong binuksan iyong kasunod na libro. At iyong kasunod. At ang isa pa... but nothing gave me anything.

It was another fucking dead end.

My teeth were clashing with each other because of utter frustration. Halos ibato ko na iyong mga libro dahil sa sobrang inis! But I needed to be patient. Kailangan ko nang lumabas dahil anumang minuto ay maaaring magising si Avo at hanapin ako. And I didn't want to make him doubt my intentions. I needed him to think that everything was going smoothly between the two of us.

Lumabas ako sa kwarto niya at saka bumaba para kumuha ng tubig. Pabalik na sana ako sa kwarto ko para balikan si Avo nung makita ko si Cathy sa labas ng pintuan. Agad na nakuha niya ang atensyon ko... What was she doing here?

Lalapitan ko sana si Cathy para itanong kung ano ang pakay niya dito nung makarinig ako ng malakas na sampal. Natigilan ako.

"What did you say?!"

Shit. Si Ella. Bakit sila magka-usap?

"I love him..." umiiyak na sabi ni Cathy.

"Love?! You love him?!"

Tumango si Cathy habang umiiyak.

"You delusional bitch! What made you think that Fuji gives a damn about you?!"

Oh, my god. Si Fuji?!

"He loves me!"

At isang sampal na naman ang nakuha ni Cathy.

"Magising ka sa katotohanan!" sigaw ni Ella. Bigla niyang hinatak iyong buhok ni Cathy at nagsimula siyang hatakin palayo sa bahay. Agad akong naalarma. Ella's crazy! Hindi ko alam kung ano ang gagawin niya kay Cathy! Sinundan ko sila. Hindi ko alam kung ano ang pumasok sa utak ko kaya hindi ako makalapit, but I was silently praying that someone would see us. Natatakot ako sa pwedeng gawin ni Ella kay Cathy!

Patuloy na hinatak ni Ella si Cathy hanggang sa makarating kami sa lugar na iyon... Chills began to creep in my system. Biglang nanikip ang dibdib ko. Biglang bumalik ang mga alaala sa akin.

"He'll never love you! You're just his toy!"

Cathy silently accepted every slap.

"You're just his slave for the sem! He'll throw you like the trash that you are!"

Shit. S-siya ang napili ni Fuji? Pero akala ko...

"So stop thinking that you're something else, because you're nothing but a trash to be discarded!"

Hindi ako makapagsalita. Hindi ako makagalaw.

"Aren't you a trash yourself, Ella? Hindi ba't ilang beses ka na ring itinapon ni Avo?"

Biglang natigilan si Ella.

"Why you—"

"Isn't that the reason why you plotted against Boe? Isn't that the reason why you asked me to report all her whereabouts to you?"

MORIOR INVICTUS

Chapitre Vingt Six

Bigla akong nanigas sa kinatatayuan ko. Bigla kong nahigit ang paghinga ko. I couldn't believe what I was hearing... I refused to believe it even if I was hearing it myself. Paano nila nagawa sa akin 'to? She was my friend... and yet she fucking betrayed me. Hindi ako makapaniwala... Ayokong maniwala. Pakiramdam ko ay naninikip ang dibdib ko sa mga naririnig ko.

"What?!" Ella shouted.

"Bakit? Hindi ba?" Cathy retorted

"Are you accusing me?!" Ella shouted again.

Cathy smiled. And then she threw me a glance. She knew... she knew I was listening... My chest hurt.

"I knew you were low... I didn't know it's possible for you to get lower," Cathy said. "Paano mo nagawa sa kanya iyon?"

Tears began to fall. I couldn't believe what I was hearing... I knew something was wrong... I knew she didn't like me... but this? This was unforgivable. This was something nothing could ever repair.

Lumapit si Ella at malakas na sinampal si Cathy.

"You have no idea what you're talking about!" Ella shouted, her hand harshly cupping Cathy's face. "And if I ever did anything to her, wala ka ng pakielam doon! She deserved it!"

I clenched my fist and gritted my teeth. Mas lalong sumisikip ang dibdib ko sa mga sinasabi niya. I deserved it?! I deserved to be raped?! What did I ever do to her for her to wish that upon me?! Hindi ba't ilang beses ko na sinasabi sa kanya na si Avo ang sisihin niya?! Kailan ko ba inagaw si Avo sa kanya? Did I beg?! Did I steal him away from her?!

"She deserved everything she got!"

The logical side of me was starting to fade. All I could see was red. All I wanted was blood.

"Every single thing she got, she asked for it!" she continued.

"Isusumbong kita kay Avo! I'll tell him what you did! I'll tell him what you asked me to do!" Cathy shouted back. Biglang hinila ni Ella si Cathy sa buhok. She wrote *Memento Mori* on the wall and it opened. "Saan mo ako dadalhin?!"

Sobrang bilis ng tibok ng puso ko. I couldn't think clearly. I just wanted to get revenge on Ella. I just wanted my retribution. I just wanted her to pay for everything she did to me! Dahil hindi ko dapat naranasan iyon! Hindi sana ako ganito kung hindi dahil sa kanya! She made me do horrible things! She pushed me!

Agad akong sumunod sa kanila sa loob. Alam ko na hindi na ako nag-iisip. I was mad. I was fucking mad.

"What the—"

Napatigil si Ella sa ginagawa niya kay Cathy nung nakita niya ako. I clenched my fists.

"Totoo ba?" tanong ko sa kanya. I just wanted to hear it myself. Na siya ang dahilan. Na siya ang dahilan kung bakit nangyari ang lahat ng iyon sa akin. "Totoo ba… na ikaw ang may gawa sa akin?"

Ella looked at me. She's mad at me, alam ko. Pakiramdam niya ay inagaw ko sa kanya ang lahat, alam ko… pero sapat ba 'yun? Sapat ba iyon para sirain niya ang buhay ko?

"Kung totoo… may magagawa ka ba?" she asked.

Nagsimulang pumatak iyong mga luha ko. Hindi ko alam kung bakit ako naiiyak… marahil ay dahil sa inis. At galit. Dahil hanggang ngayon,

hindi ko pa rin maintindihan kung bakit sa tingin niya ay tama lang na ginawa niya sa akin iyon.

Could you ever hate somebody enough to do that to her?

Inilipat ko iyong tingin ko kay Cathy.

"I trusted you..." I said, my voice breaking. "You were my friend..."

Ni hindi siya maka-tingin sa akin.

"You told me not to trust anyone, but I didn't think you'd be the first one to betray me."

Matatanggap ko na si Ella ang gumawa sa akin. Alam ko na galit siya sa akin. Sa bawat pagkikita namin, palagi niyang pinapaalala sa akin na kung may pagkakataon siya, papatayin niya ako... Pero si Cathy? Paano niya nagawa sa akin 'to?

"I tried to warn you..." she whispered.

"You tried?" I said as tears kept on flowing. "Kaya ba pinabayaan mo akong maglakad palabas kahit na alam mo na may mangyayari sa akin? Iyon ba?!"

"Hindi ko sinasadya..." she said, crying.

Sa tuwing ipinipikit ko ang mga mata ko, naaalala ko pa rin iyon. Hanggang ngayon, iyon pa rin ang laman ng mga panaginip ko. Sa tuwing naiisip ko, halos hindi ako maka-hinga... tapos sasabihin niya na hindi niya sinasadya?!

"You didn't mean to?! You didn't mean what happened to me?! You didn't mean everything those bastards did to me?! Iyon ba ang ibig mong sabihin?!"

Wala akong pakielam kung umiiyak siya. Kahit ilang luha pa ang ilabas niya, hindi nun matutumbasan iyong naranasan ko sa lugar na 'to! She created a demon out of me!

"I tried to stay away from you! Kasi kapag tinatanong nila ako, ayoko na may maisasagot ako!" she shouted back. "Every time I was asked, I said nothing because there was nothing I know! Hindi kita kinakausap dahil ayoko na may malaman! I accepted every bruise I was given because I was trying to protect you!"

Biglang bumalik sa isip ko lahat ng mga gabi na wala siya. Lahat ng umaga na paggising ko, walą na agad siya. Lahat ng pasa na akala ko ay sa klase niya nakuha. Iyon ba 'yun?

"Gusto mong patawarin kita dahil doon?" I said, my lips shaking in unexplainable anger.

"I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry... Pero wala akong magagawa... They threatened my family. They made me lose my rank. I had no choice, Boe."

I looked at her, and I couldn't feel any pity for her.

"You could've said no."

You could've saved me.

"I chose to save my family..." she said, crying. "And I'd choose it again, if I have to."

Hindi ako makapaniwala na naririnig ko ang mga 'to galing sa kanya. Siya ang una kong kaibigan. Siya iyong una kong pinagkatiwalaan. Hindi ako makapaniwala na siya ang gagawa sa akin ng ganito.

"You were afraid of Ella?"

Slowly, she nodded.

"And you weren't afraid of me?" I said, my chest heaving in anger. "You should be afraid of me."

My lips were quivering. I was trying to contain myself. I was fuming mad. Ngayon lang ako nagalit ng ganito. Ngayon ko lang naranasan na traydurin... and I didn't know it hurt this bad.

"Tapos na ba kayong magdrama?" Ella said.

She attempted to go outside, but I quickly grabbed the gun I saw Lorenzo toss the last time we were here. My hands were shaking, but I pointed the gun at her face. This was not the time to be afraid. No one was here to save me. I was the only one left to save myself.

"No one leaves this room until I say so," I said. I had no time to contact Sandra. At alam ko na kapag nakabalik kami sa loob ng AdM, mahihirapan na ako na magkaroon ng oras para kausaping muli si Ella. And I was not about to spare another opportunity.

She laughed at me.

"Says who?"

"Me," I said, and then removed the safety on the gun. "I'll shoot you in the head."

Nginitian niya ako.

"Ikaw?" sabi niya, natatawa. "I'm sorry, but you don't struck me as someone who does things like this. Sorry, Estrella. I really don't believe you," she continued, shrugging her shoulders.

My breathing was ragged.

"Are you sure?" I asked her. And then I pointed my gun at Cathy and quickly shot her in the head. I didn't even bother to look at her. She betrayed me... and that's the price of her betrayal. I wasn't done with her. I would kill her entire family for what she caused me. She should've chosen who she would fear.

And she should have feared me.

I was an Estrella... and the monster inside me had awoken. I should be the one she feared. She should've stayed under my mercy.

Biglang nanlaki ang mga mata ni Ella dahil sa bilis ng pangyayari. My lips were quivering but I managed to smile. Nanginginig iyong mga daliri ko at saka ko ibinalik sa kanya iyong tutok ng baril.

"You still don't believe me?" I said, cocking the gun to prepare for another shot. "If I managed to kill an old friend, sino ka para hindi ko patayin?"

Ella's face became serious.

"You won't... My family will kill yours if you kill me."

A lazy smile broke on my face.

"You really don't know me, Elliana Montrova." I said and then shot her right leg. Bigla siyang napaupo. "No one will know what happened." And then I shot her in the arm. "Your body will be dismembered and you will be thrown at the deepest end of the sea." I smiled. "No one will know you died... and soon, you will be forgotten."

"You bitch!"

Napa-ngiti ako.

"This bitch will kill you."

Humakbang ako palapit sa kanya. I didn't avoid the blood that was flowing from her gunshot wounds. I'd thrive in her blood. That was the price of every tears I shed because of her. Of every slap I endured from her.

"Don't you find it ironic?" sabi ko habang itinututok sa ulo niya iyong baril. "Avo… the man you claim to love, taught me how to shoot… he basically taught me how to kill you."

Blood was flowing from her legs, but I still couldn't find pity within myself. She was beyond saving… kagaya ko.

"You see the blood on the wall? Dyan paulit-ulit na hinampas iyong ulo ko." At tuwing gabi, parati ko pa rin iyong naaalala. Paulit-ulit. Walang tigil.

She looked up, her gaze enough to bury me alive.

"I wasn't the one who did that!" biglang sabi niya. "I was just lying! Hindi ko alam kung sino ang may gawa sa iyo non!"

Tinitigan ko siyang mabuti.

"Why would I believe you now? You just told me that you're the one responsible for everything."

At mas itinutok ko sa gitna ng noo niya iyong baril. The gun was warm against my hand. And soon, Ella would be nothing but a cold, lifeless corpse. Because that's what she deserved.

"I was just lying! I didn't do that! I hate you but I wouldn't do that to you!"

Nagsimula na siyang umiyak. The Great Elliana Montrova was crying in front of me… but still, I couldn't believe a word she said.

"Ask her! Ask anyone! I didn't do it!"

I cocked my head towards the lifeless body of Cathy.

"The only person who could save you just died."

I placed my hand against the trigger. It still felt warm against my skin.

"If you kill me, my family will destroy yours…" she said. She sounded

frail, so afraid. I never thought I would witness something as wonderful as this. She was beginning to cry… Probably afraid for her looming end. Because I would kill her. I would destroy her.

"I'll take my chances," I said, beginning to pull the trigger. Pero bago ko pa man magawa, bigla kong narinig na may tumawag sa pangalan ko.

"Estrella."

Natigilan ako.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

Hindi ko na kailangang tignan kung sino iyon. I knew his voice. I knew his presence. All I didn't know was his motives. All the secrets hiding behind his smiles… I'd soon find out all about him.

"Killing the enemy," I whispered, looking at Ella's face. I would be the last person she'd see before she dies… I didn't think I deserved that honor.

"Shit," he cursed under his breath. "You can't do this. Her family will haunt you down!" he said and then continued to curse. "You shouldn't be doing this! This isn't right!"

I turned around and looked at him. He was looking at the bloodbath caused by Cathy's blood… and soon after, Ella's blood would flow. And I wouldn't feel any regret.

"You're the one who told me to play the game. And here I am, playing it."

And then I pulled the trigger. And then I smiled… but I knew my smile didn't mean anything. It was empty… like my heart. Like his heart. They were both useless.

"Aren't you proud, Night? I just killed using my own hands… I'm not a hypocrite anymore…" I said as I let go of the gun.

Chapitre Vingt Sept

Night kept on cursing as he stared at the two lifeless bodies in front of him. And I didn't feel anything… I didn't even feel an ounce of remorse for what I did. And I should. Cathy only did that to save her family… but she should have known that every betrayal has a price. She should have been prepared to pay the price. And that was her life.

"Shit," Night cursed again.

I pursed my lips and looked at him. I had never seen him as perturbed as he was today.

"You shouldn't have done that," he said, looking at me. "You shouldn't have killed Ella."

My lips quivered as I replied. If there's a death that I would regret, it wasn't Ella's. She deserved it. She deserved what she got… and if she didn't, then I also didn't deserve the hell she made me go through. But I guess nothing in this life we're living was fair. Death was the only ending. She should've known.

"How would I know?" And then I looked at him, my eyes lifeless. "You never tell me anything."

I was tired.

"Because you're not supposed to know anything! Not yet!"

A smile slowly broke on my face.

"Alright," I said, giving in. "I'll play your game… and I've played my part. Now do yours."

Napatingin si Night sa mga katawan sa harap niya. Ella's eyes were still wide open… and she was looking at me. I was the last person she saw before her demise. She probably never expected that. She pushed me around whenever she could .. she never expected that I'd be the one to take her life. Funny how life works that way.

One second you're alive… the next one, some bitch just killed you.

Nung hindi gumalaw si Night, nagsimulang gumalaw ang mga paa ko. I was looking for the phone. I needed Sandra. I needed her help.

"What are you doing?" Night said, holding my arm as I held on the phone.

"I'm going to call Sandra."

Agad niyang inagaw sa akin iyong hawak ko.

"No."

I stared at him.

"Will you help me, then?"

He stared hard. And yet, I still couldn't read him. There were so many things he was hiding, and I couldn't wait until I get a hold of all of his secrets. He was hiding so many.

He didn't say a word, and instead, crouched down and put his hand over Ella's eyes and made them close.

"She shouldn't have died," he whispered.

But the dead would remain dead. And there's nothing to do about it.

Night asked me to stay out of his way as he cleaned the mess I created. He asked me not to look at him as he dismembered the body, but I kept my eyes on him. He was a monster, I knew, but I never thought I'd be seeing this side of him… how evil he could really be. How low he could get just to play this game he was leading…

"How can you cut down your own friend, Night?"

He got a knife and a black bag, and started cutting the joints.

"How can you kill her?" he shot back. "And you even killed your own

friend."

My eyes went on Cathy. She was laying on the cold ground, blood still flowing from her wound. She was just a part of the mess Ella created. She shouldn't have played the game. She was a pawn… and pawns get discarded first.

"That's the price of betrayal, Night," I said as I looked at him. "So, don't you ever betray me."

He looked at me, blood splattered on his face when he cut Ella's arms.

"I'm not your enemy."

"Sure…"

There was nothing to do but believe that everything he said was nothing but blatant lies. He's not telling me the truth. He was just playing his game… and if he, for one second, think that I was just playing my part, then he's wrong. I had my own game I was playing. And I had a different aim.

I sat down and hugged my knees. I sat far from them. I didn't want their blood on my clothes.

"What are you going to do with those?" I asked as he began to bag the remains of Ella's body.

"Disposing the body," he said. After he was done with Ella, lumapit siya sa katawan ni Cathy.

His face and hands were covered with blood. I should feel disgust, but I really couldn't feel anything anymore. I was finally understanding his words… that in this life, heart would do you no good. It would be the cause of your downfall. And I was not about to go that path. I still had things to do.

There's no way I'd die before finishing my business.

Night looked serious as he began to cut her…

"Can I?" I asked, looking at Night as he was holding the bloody knife.

"You want to cut your friend?" hindi makapaniwala niyang tanong.

Slowly, I nodded… I didn't know what was wrong with me, but something was seriously wrong. There was this lust inside me. The blood

looked so enticing.

Lumapit ako sa kanya. He gave me the knife.

"You begin with the joints," he said as he positioned my hands. "You can't cut through the bones with just a knife, so you cut the joints."

I watched as he guided my hands. Nothing felt this empowering.

"You cut deep," he said as the knife dug deeper.

He made me do it. I cut my own friend. I couldn't believe what I was doing, but I did it. And after that, he got the knife from my hands. He unceremoniously began to mutilate her. He finished the joints, cutting through the bones. He tore off the limbs one by one, blood continued to flow. I tried to pry my eyes away, but I couldn't. I wanted to see this. I wanted to see what happened to the people who dared cross me.

Death. That was the only payment.

And blood... lots of blood.

"Won't you ask me why I did it? She was a friend..."

"She's just a pawn. I wouldn't care if she lived," he said. And then he removed the heads from the body. He took the fingers, and the teeth. "Her death's on you."

Inilagay niya sa ibang plastic bag iyong ulo at mga daliri.

"What are you doing?" I asked.

"Cleaning your mess," he answered as he sealed the bag. "They shouldn't be able to identify the body without the head. The fingers would give away their prints."

He began to put the limbs on another bag. Sweat were dripping down from his forehead. It had been almost an hour since he started cutting the bodies up.

Morius Invictus

"Is that her family motto?" I asked as I saw Night cutting a portion of Ella's skin. A phrase was tattooed on the skin.

"*Morius Invictus*. Death before defeat," Night said.

The side of my lips lifted.

"But she was defeated..." I whispered. "She was scared before I killed

her."

It defeated the purpose of her life.

Night looked at me. He was finally done removing everything that might help identify the body. He was a bloody mess. Hindi ko alam kung saan niya natutunan ang mga ginawa niya… The way he dismembered both of them, he did it with ease. As if he had done this before. And the thing was… he didn't scare me one bit. It just made me more curious. I wanted to know more about him.

"And let's dispose them before you get yourself killed for what you did," Night said.

I didn't know why he was helping me, but I didn't care. He called someone from another phone—one hidden in another place. There were lots of things hidden in this place. Lots of secrets buried… some I might never know of.

"This is Nightly Von Klampenberg, number 291316. I need a car in the old location. Bring me my guns, and leave the car there. Do it asap," he said. "And bring me two sets of clothes. One for me and one for a girl."

Pagkatapos niyang ibaba ang tawag, ibinalik niya sa dating lalagyan iyong cellphone. He put the black bags in another black bag, and then brought out a bleach. I was surprised to discover the things they could hide in this place.

"That's a lot of blood to clean," I commented as he started cleaning the floor.

"You're a messy killer," he said as he began to scrub.

"Why don't you just ask your people to clean this?" I asked him.

"You killed a *Dieux*. I can't just ask anyone to clean this mess. This is between us," he said, and then looked at me. "This is a secret between us."

And I felt tingles in my spine. A secret. Our secret. Did I just get something I could hold over his head?

An hour passed and he was finally done removing the blood. He picked up the gun and then tossed it to me. Binuhat niya iyong mga

plastic na naglalaman ng mga piraso ng katawan ni Cathy at Ella.

"Where are we going?" I asked him. We changed clothes inside his car. We put them in another bag. The bodies were resting in the trunk.

He started the engine and then placed his hand on the steering wheel.

"Hiding your mistake," he said and then sped away.

Nakarating kami sa isang pier. Doon, may naghihintay na isang yacht sa amin. Night threw the plastic bag over, and then assisted me to get on the yacht.

"Do you know how to drive this?" I asked him. He didn't answer me, and instead, he began to maneuver the yacht to the deepest parts of the sea. Ilang minuto kaming naglalayag bago pa man siya huminto. Kumuha siya ng lalagyan at saka itinapon doon iyong mga suot naming damit. He burned the clothes we wore. He tossed the knife he used to butcher the dead—it was long and blood was covering it from end to end. And I tossed the gun I used into the deeper part of the sea.

No one would ever know… and soon, you'd be forgotten, Ella.

"Do you think anyone will suspect us?" I asked him as we threw the remains of the bodies in the sea. No one would ever see them again… the fishes would feast on them even. Nothing would be left.

Night didn't answer. He just kept on throwing the limbs. He kept quiet, until we returned to the secret passage.

"Shit," he cursed when the passage wouldn't open. "Fucking shit."

"Wala ba tayong ibang dadaanan?"

Umiling siya.

"We have no choice," he said. "We have to go through the gates."

Biglang lumakas ang kabog ng dibdib ko. Kung doon kami dadaan, malalaman nila na nanggaling kami sa labas… And the *Dieux* were not stupid. I knew they'd be able to put two and two together. That I was the one responsible for her death… and then a war would be waged. And more lives would be lost.

"There must be another way," I replied.

He looked at me.

"There's no other way."

"What will I say? If they asked why we're outside… and why we're together?"

I needed to fabricate a believable lie. I didn't get this far only to get caught. There were lots of things I needed to know. There were lots of secrets I needed to unearth.

"I can tell them my parents contacted me," I said. Surely they wouldn't question my parents… No one dared. Ever.

Agad na umiling si Night.

"No."

At nakuha niya ang atensyon ko. Why was he so adamant against it?

"Why?"

"Nothing."

But it didn't feel like nothing.

"You tell them you needed time to think… so you went outside."

"That's a lame excuse," I commented.

"It's better. And believable. Given your state of mind," he said and then threw me a look. "Don't ever do that again, Estrella. Don't kill without thinking. You're fucking impulsive."

He didn't understand betrayal because he didn't have any friends. He didn't understand how I felt. I was trying to be merciful… I'd spare Cathy's family because she was a friend… despite everything she caused me. That was the extent of what I could do to her. Everything else, it was her mistake. She chose the wrong person to wrong.

"And if they ask why we're together?"

He tossed me the key.

"We're not together. You arrived alone. I am on my way to Berlin as of the moment," he said and then walked away. But he stopped midway. "Whatever happens, don't talk to anyone about this. Not to Lorenzo, not to Laurie, not to Avo… and definitely not to Fuji."

I looked at him. He was so serious.

"Why not Fuji?"

"You just killed the person he loved the most."

Chapitre Vingt Huit

I breathed hard before I dared enter the vicinity. I couldn't explain what I was feeling... it was a fusion of excitement and fear. Of rush and uncertainty. I didn't know what would happen to me... if anyone would suspect me of what I did. Or if they'd know...

I walked straight inside as my ID gave away the fact that I attended this school, unfortunately. Diretso akong naglalakad, sa bawat hakbang ay iniisip ko kung alam ba nila ang mga ginawa ko. I didn't want to get caught, no I didn't want that, but a part of me wanted to be recognized for what I did. I was a hypocrite no more. I proved to be more than that.

Hindi ko alam kung paano ko nagawang maglakad nang diretso hanggang sa bahay. I just walked and walked, not minding a single soul. I had been afraid of the darkness since the incident, and for the first time in weeks, I was again able to walk alone. Without fear.

One enemy down.

Hindi ko alam kung ilan pa ang natitira, but I'd hunt them down. I didn't care for what Night thought of me. I didn't care if he thought I was reckless and impulsive. In the kind of life we lead, it's either kill or be killed. And getting killed wasn't an option. Not for me.

When I arrived at the house, Avo was there waiting for me.

"Where were you?" he asked.

I stared at him. He was clueless. He didn't know someone special died. This must be what power felt like.

"Out," I said. I began to play the lie Night orchestrated for the both of us. "I needed to think."

And then I smiled.

"And were you able to think?" Avo said, and I nodded.

"I'm hungry," I replied. Avo held me by my waist as we made way to the kitchen.

It was already dawn when I came back. The chef was already out but I was starving. What I did with Night drained my energy and I needed to replenish that. I knew more was about to come... No secret remains a secret. A day would come when everything would be spilled. Including what happened today. And I should be prepared.

"You know how to cook?" I said in awe as Avo reached for the pan.

Avo shook his head.

"No. But how hard can it get?"

He went to the fridge and got chicken. He thawed it, and while we were waiting for the chicken to soften, he sat beside me. He held my hand and played with it while asking me questions.

"When do you want to practice?" he asked.

"Ha?"

"For your finals. Because I don't want Ella to hurt you again."

Bigla kong naagaw sa kanya iyong kamay ko nung binanggit niya iyong pangalan ni Ella. Agad naman na kumunot ang noo niya.

"Why? Did I say something wrong?" he asked, worried.

I shook my head. I tried to act cool. My face shouldn't give away anything that happened tonight. It was my secret. It was our secret.

"Nothing..." I replied. "Maybe I'm just really hungry."

"What did you do outside for you to become that hungry?" he asked.

I pursed my lips and remained unfazed.

"I just cut... things."

Avo let it pass, since he had no idea about what transpired hours ago.

I wonder if he'd still look at me like that... like he adored me, like I was the center of his universe, once he learned about the things I did... and the things I was about to do.

How far could love go? Would it let you accept someone for who they really are? Or are those just sweet and empty words?

In the end, Avo accidentally dipped his finger in the oil. It was stupid of him, and at the same time, sweet because he tried to cook though he obviously was lacking in that area. At dahil wala na namang bukas na kahit na ano sa oras na 'to, I just settled on drinking milk. I'd just have to eat tomorrow. That could wait. Mas gusto kong matulog.

Avo slept in my bedroom. He just hugged me as we slept. And I think that helped. I didn't have any nightmares that night.

I sat in front of the grand piano in the middle of the receiving area. With Night being gone for three days already, I was starting to feel fidgety. For how long could we keep this charades going? At kailan ba siya uuwi? Pakiramdam ko ay nagdududa na ang mga tao. Tatlong araw na ring wala si Ella. I wasn't doing anything to draw suspicions on me, but I could only do so much.

Stretching my fingers, I put my fingers on top of the piano tiles and began to play Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata. It was the piece my mother taught when one summer that she visited me in Japan. It always had a soothing effect on me. Pumikit ako habang tinutugtog ko iyon, wishing that the calmness of the music was enough to put my worries at bay.

But even before I could finish my piece, a voice from behind me was heard.

"Estrella."

Agad na napatigil ako sa pagtugtog. Even if I rarely heard that voice, I still knew it. His stares haunted me for nights. His unknown anger lingered.

"Fuji," I said as I stood up and looked at him.

And there he was, looking at me with those dead eyes of his. I had always known he harbored anger towards me, but I didn't know it was because of Ella. If he loved her so much, why didn't he get her for himself? Avo had thrown Ella over and over again. It must have been painful to watch. Especially if the person whom you loved was being treated like shit by someone else.

"Where's Ella?" he said, his jaw clenched hard.

My face remained stoic. I shouldn't give anything away.

"I don't know," I replied.

"Liar," he gritted through his teeth. He took a step forward. He had always looked mad at me, but tonight, his anger was at a different level. His chest was heaving in anger. It was very visible.

I wanted to take a step back. I wanted to get away from him, but I couldn't. And I shouldn't. He shouldn't know that I was hiding something.

"Why are you asking me?"

And then I saw him pressing his fist. He's mad, and he's showing it.

"You're the last one with her."

I pressed my lips. My face remained impassive.

"We're not exactly friends in case you didn't notice, Fuji."

But my answer just made him angrier. Lorenzo was right. Anyone's capable of murder, if triggered and given the right reasons. And by killing Ella, I just provided Fuji the ammunition. Agad akong napahawak sa pendant ko. I'd always thought that my enemy wouldn't harm me out in the open, but looking at Fuji's eyes, I knew he's ready to take my life. Right here, right now.

"I checked the CCTV. You followed her from here… and then's she's gone!" he growled.

Biglang lumakas ang tibok ng puso ko. Shit! Iyong CCTV! That cursed CCTV! Bakit ito gumagana kapag laban sa akin, pero kapag ako

ang nangangailangan, palagi itong sira?! Was this some kind of sick joke?!

"Kaya pinagbibintangan mo ako?!"

I had just to get mad. I had to get offended. I couldn't let him beat me at my own game.

Agad siyang lumapit at saka hinawakan ang braso ko. I grimaced at the pain. He was holding me too tight. I could already feel the bruise forming in my arm.

"What did you do to her?" he said, his voice laced with threat. Night was right. I shouldn't admit to anything. Most especially to Fuji. He'd go crazy if he learned about what we did to the person he loved the most. The look in his eyes was enough to prove that he's willing to do anything… to me. Kapag nalaman niya na ako ang may kagagawan kung bakit nawawala si Ella.

"Nothing," I replied.

Mas lalo niyang hinigpitan ang hawak sa braso ko.

"I'll kill you if anything happened to her. Not even Avo can stop me. Not even your family."

My breathing started to quicken, but I had to keep it together. I was already in the middle of my game. I couldn't lose now. I couldn't stop now.

"I had nothing to do with her," I said, slowly peeling his hold on me. I stared at him. I shouldn't look scared. He shouldn't know what I was even feeling.

His eyes blazing, his jaw clenched, and his hands pressed into fists, he looked like he was ready to go for the kill and snap my neck.

"Pray, Belinda Estrella. Pray hard. Because if you did something to her, I'd stop at nothing to get back at you."

Then he walked away. And I noticed that I was holding my breath the entire time.

"Where are you, you asshole?"

I had been waiting for Night's return. Tuwing nakikita ko si Fuji, nakakaramdam ako ng kakaiba sa dibdib ko. I knew I had to act tough, but I couldn't do it the whole time. He's suspicious of me, and it would only take a few more days before he discovered what really happened.

"Boe."

Napahinto ako dahil sa pagtawag sa pangalan ko. I smiled when I saw Avo. Nilapitan niya ako at saka hinawakan ako sa magkabila kong braso.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

I nodded, and said, "Just nervous about the exam." Lie. That was the least of my worries. As time passed by, the list of the things I needed to worry about just kept on piling up.

"I don't think you should worry about that anymore," he said. "Ella's missing. She won't be able to participate."

I froze.

"Do... you know where she is?" I asked.

He shook his head, and I continued to hold on to my breath.

"Maybe she went home. She always does things like this. Go missing for days." Maybe he should tell this to Fuji. He had been breathing on my neck for days. Kahit ano ang gawin niya, hindi niya na mahahanap pa si Ella. She's gone. She's probably floating in the sea. There's no way in hell he could find her. There's no way in hell he could find evidence he could use against me.

Only Night knew about it... and his hands were as bloody as mine.

"Good to know," I replied with a smile.

Avo and I sat by the couch. I hadn't seen him yesterday. He was doingbusiness outside, and yet I couldn't get inside his room. It was locked. I tried everything. I was close to breaking his door down. My mind was still itching to know more about that Alistair Yoseff Ostenhaimer.

"What were you doing outside?" I asked as he was busy caressing my arms with his fingers.

"Business."

"What business?"

One good thing that came with sleeping with Avo was that he wouldn't question it if I was interested in his affairs. It was one of the good things… one of the many.

"Family."

"Your sister okay?" I asked. I remembered she got kidnapped before.

He stilled. For a moment. But that moment clearly meant something. I knew the list just got longer.

"Yeah…" he trailed. "She's fine."

"What's her name?"

"Arabella."

"She's your only sibling?"

I could feel him freezing. I waited until he was ready to answer… but even before he could say anything, Fuji was marching towards us. And he looked pissed.

"What did you do to her?!" he shouted. His eyes looked crazy.

Avo wrapped his arms around my shoulder, and held me close to him.

"What are you talking about?" Avo asked Fuji.

"Ella's missing!"

"Maybe she went home," Avo offered as an explanation.

"I checked with her family. She hasn't been home since the beginning of the sem," Fuji said and then turned his fiery gaze at me. "You were the last one with her."

I evened my breathing. This wasn't the time to panic.

"I wasn't with her," I said, enunciating every word clearly. "I didn't even talk to her. We hate each other. We're not friends."

"Oh, don't fuck with me, Estrella! You were following her towards the secret passage and then hours later, you came back and you passed

through the main gate! Do I look stupid to you?!"

Biglang lumakas ang kabog ng dibdib ko. Why was he only questioning me?! If he had seen the CCTV, he must have seen Night as well! He followed us! He was even the one crazy enough to chop up the bodies! Why was I the only one at the receiving end?!

"So?" I said, trying my damnest to prevent my lips from quivering.

Magsasalita pa sana si Fuji nung maunahan siya ni Avo.

"That doesn't prove anything, Fuji."

Fuji shut his jaw.

"She's been gone, Avo. She's not here. She's outside, and her family doesn't know where she is. You fucking know what this means."

Avo's hold on me loosened. But he didn't say a word.

"This is another Avo in the making," Fuji spewed. My forehead creased. "Oh, your little girlfriend doesn't know what a fraud you are? And a traitor?"

HOC EST BELLUM

Chapitre Vingt Neuf

Augustus Voltaire Ostenhaimer

"We only need one heir."

My father looked at us both. Ayo shifted uncomfortably on his seat. I knew he hated this day. He wasn't tailored for this kind of life, but what could he do? It's what he was living for… to continue the legacy that was *Ostenhaimer.*

"Ayo."

And as soon as my father mentioned his name, fear crossed his eyes. Ayo had always been my father's favorite. He was smart and very talented. He could think of tactics that even I couldn't think of. He was the brains. And I? I was more on the side of being feared… my earliest kill was when I was eight years old. I could still remember the power that I felt when I pulled the trigger. And the rush it gave me when I saw blood flowing in the middle of his forehead.

That was why people avoided me. They feared me. I didn't have control… not much, anyway.

"Yes, father?"

My father looked at him and I could see that he didn't want this, either. How could he, anyway? How could he send his favorite child in that hellhole? Everybody knows that *Academia de Mondragon* was

nothing but a piece of shit. Equilibrium, they said. Peace, they promised. But how could we have peace in this kind of life? It wasn't even a possibility. Not even at the slightest. It was like one of the promises parents make in order to control their children.

It was bullshit. Every family in the business was mandated to send at least one kid. It was supposed to bring harmony—at least in some crooked up way—in our society. That as long as every family has a child inside that school—from the poorest to the most powerful families—we wouldn't completely self-destruct, because who doesn't love family, right? And everyone agreed to it. Well, my stupid ancestors, anyway.

"Your mother and I agreed to send you to the school," he told Ayo. "The school's pressuring us to send your brother, but we can't do that. Avo is the future of our family."

Of course. I was the heartless one. I was the perfect heir.

"We'd send you in place of Avo, but you have to use his name."

Ayo's face fell. The colors in his face drained. I felt bad for him, but what could he do? In our life, lineage was the priority in all things. And Ayo knew himself that he couldn't lead the business. It was mine. I was born for it.

"Are we clear on that?" father asked. And Ayo, unable to do anything but agree, nodded his head. "Very well, you will be leaving at dawn tomorrow."

When father left us, I stood in front of Ayo. His fists were clenched. He was enraged, I could see, but he wasn't doing anything.

"You could've said no," I offered.

"You know I can't."

I shrugged.

"You never tried asking. The worst thing you can get is a no."

He raised his head and looked at me.

"Am I supposed to act like you?" he asked.

I shrugged.

"Don't kid yourself, Ayo. You're an angel; I'm a demon."

He smiled.

"You are. That's why father will sacrifice me for you."

He was right. He was father's favorite, but he was still being sacrificed. This was how family works… at least, in our world.

"I'll try to visit you," I told him, but we both knew it was a lie. I had lots of things to do. Worrying about him was the least of my priorities.

The day after, Ayo was shipped to the Philippines. I stayed in France for a while, until I was shipped to China. My family was trying to grow a network there, and it was hard. The Estrellas controlled both Japan and China, and infiltrating their network was a pain in the neck. We had always control over Europe, but here in Asia? It was a whole new world.

"Why can't we just kill them, father?"

"We could… but we shouldn't."

"Why? Killing is the easiest thing."

With one bullet, you can take one life. You can destroy a whole life. You can break a person's heart. Killing has always been wonderful.

"If we kill them, the organization will self-destruct."

"Then we take over," I said.

"No. There's a hierarchy and the next to take over would be the Del Rio."

"Then we kill them, too."

My father shook his head.

"Killing isn't always the answer," he said. Lie.

Most of my formative years had been spent trying to rise above expectations. I had kill more than I could count. My father allowed me to spearhead the operations, but as soon as I turned fifteen, I was only allowed to control from a distance. I couldn't kill the enemies anymore. He said that my life was too important to be put at stake.

"This isn't what I signed up for!" I roared. I was tired of being tied down. I wasn't meant to be the brain of our organization! If I would be that, they should've sent me to that damned school, instead! Ayo would have made a better head than I would ever be.

"We had already made our way in Asia. We'll take it slow," my father explained. I didn't listen. All I cared about was how I was being restrained. And I was never good at that. I never liked being controlled—I had always been the one in control. Everything that was happening was just making me furious.

One summer, I sent a letter to Ayo. I told him I'd be going to the Philippines for a visit. My father didn't know about it, but I couldn't care less. All he'd been telling me about was control, control, control. I wasn't an animal. I wasn't a thing to be tamed. So I left our home in Japan and went to the Philippines.

"Avo!" I could see Ayo from a distance. And he was with someone. My forehead turned into crease. "Does father know?" he asked.

I immediately shook my head. Why did he even have to ask? It was like he didn't know me at all.

"Of course he doesn't know," Ayo said. And then he noticed me staring at the guy he brought with him. "Avo, this is Oli. Oli, this is Avo—the real Avo."

The crease in my forehead just got worse.

"Don't worry. Oli is my best friend. He wouldn't snitch on us," Ayo convinced me, but I wasn't easily convinced. Trust was a concept unfamiliar to me. All I knew was betrayal. That's what my father taught me. That's what life forced on me.

I looked at Oli. And then started walking.

Ayo toured me around. I didn't understand how he knew so much around the city. As far as I was concerned, the school didn't allow anyone to go out—unless your family summons you. And I was dead sure my father never summoned Ayo. He wanted Ayo inside the confines of the school. He's still the favorite, after all. He wouldn't want his favorite son in harm's way.

"Why do you know so much?" I asked him as we grabbed our cones of ice cream. Who knew Manila could be so fucking hot?

"Oli and I sneak out around sometimes. It's boring inside," Ayo said.

"No, it's not. You have Ella."

My brows furrowed.

"Who's Ella?" I asked.

"Ayo's girlfriend!" Oli beamed.

The motherfucker had a girlfriend!

"She's not my girlfriend," Ayo said. He sucked at lying. His red face gave everything away. He's smitten by whoever that Ella was. She better be good.

The next hour was filled with Ayo denying Ella and Oli proving that indeed, Ella was Ayo's girlfriend. We ate lunch out and when we were tired, we rested at the nearby cliff. We sat there and just looked over the city lights. Oli went away for a while. He said he needed to make a call. It was the first time I felt this relaxed in so long.

"Are you sure he's safe?" I asked as I stared at Oli's retreating back. I never trusted anyone—not like my brother.

"Yes. He's my best friend."

I almost had the urge to flip him for what he said. Friends? Bullshit.

"And you told him about me. What were you thinking?" I hissed. It was our family's secret. If the administration knew about our lies, shit would go down. And we were still new in this circle. Every step we took, we took it with caution. He must've knew that! He's so trusting that it's frustrating!

"He won't tell anyone."

Fucking trusting.

"He has a secret, too," Ayo said. That caught my attention. "Oli said he has a sister. Her name's Belinda and she's living in Japan. Oli said that his sister's mentally unstable that's why she was hidden from the world."

"Mentally unstable?" I asked. He nodded.

"She killed her nanny when she was four. She almost killed Oli when

she was seven. Her parents worry that she might kill them, so, she was sent far away. But what Belinda thought was that she was being hidden for protection… well, from herself. She's death personified."

Families. Parents sacrificing children for their own gain. Why wasn't I surprised?

"So you see? There's no reason for him to betray me."

Still, I didn't trust him. Friendship was a foreign concept that I wasn't interested in.

"Anyway, why are you here, Avo?" Ayo asked.

"Bored," I replied.

"Father must be looking for you now."

I doubted that. He didn't even let me do anything. He knew I lived for the kill and yet, he was forcing me to stand down. It was like he put a leash around my neck. It was suffocating.

"Do you wanna switch place?" I asked Ayo. "I'm bored. It must be fun inside that school."

Ayo almost immediately shook his head. He loved it in there. I was beginning to get real curious.

"Do you like it that much there?"

He nodded.

"At first, I hated you because you were supposed to be there. I felt like a trash thrown away… but then Ella approached me. She is my first friend," Ayo said with a smile on his stupid face. "And then there's Oli, as well. I am also friends with Fuji, but I like Oli better. There's also Lorenzo but he's always reading books. And then there's Night… well, I don't really like him. Something's wrong with that guy."

As I listened to him, I was just drawn more. I wanted his place.

"But anyway, it's alright. Oli's enough."

"That's all your friend? I can count them using my fingers," I commented. Ayo had always told me how he dreamt of having lots of friends. Yeah, right.

"I don't need many. Besides, there's a stupid hierarchy in the school.

I thought I already outgrew hierarchy, but I guess not."

And then he proceeded on explaining about the *Dieux*, *Deuxiéme*, *Troisiéme*, and the *Quatriéme*. Thrill began to flow through my bloodstream.

"So… that means you're friends with the children of the head of the Mafia organizations?"

He nodded. Brilliant.

"And… who's the heir of Estrella?"

Ayo smiled.

"Oli."

Shit.

The enemy was so close. And he was approaching.

"Sorry. That was my parents," Oli said. "You done? We need to go back to school."

"Alright, but let's take a picture first!"

The way back, my head was swirling with all the possibilities. If I kill Oli now, my father would be mad… but we'd be able to take over. I knew we could do it. But on the bigger scale, I could go inside and plan to kill all the future heirs. And for that Belinda, I'd deal with her later. I just needed to annihilate the future of the organizations. In that way, we'd be on the top of everything.

We tried to open the passage, but it was locked.

And then there was a shot.

"Shit!"

I looked around and then got my gun. But even before I could shoot the bastard, another shot was fired.

"Oli!" Ayo said and then crouched down beside his friend.

"Didn't you bring guns?!" I said.

"Why will we bring guns?!" Ayo said. Fucking wimp! And now, we're going to die because they didn't bring guns with them!

"Stand up! I'm going to take cover. You two run as fast as you can!" I said. We were already near the main gate of their school. I could cover

for them until they make it inside. I couldn't let Ayo die. He's stupid, but he's my brother!

"I can't…" Oli said.

"Stand up!" Ayo replied. "We're going to run!"

And then another shot. Shit! Oli was the target! They kept on shooting him!

"Ayo, we're all going to die if you don't run!"

"I can't leave him!"

I looked at Oli. Both his knees had been shot. There's no fucking way he could run. And I knew he knew that. His eyes said it all.

"Leave," he said.

Ayo shook his head. "No," he firmly said. "I won't leave you. They'll torture you if they get you! You know that!"

Shit. Another fire was shot. I didn't know where it was coming from! I shouldn't have invited them outside! We were sitting ducks in here! He's an *Estrella* and we're *Ostenhaimers*! We were all targets and after they're done with Oli, we're next!

"And they'll kill you if you don't leave me…"

Blood was flowing. In a matter of minutes, I knew we'd lose Oli. So I pointed my gun in his head. He looked at me and nodded. He knew I was doing this for him. He knew Ayo and I should leave. We'd all be damned if we didn't… and if we leave him alive, he'd be taken and be tortured in ways unimaginable. He knew it.

"What are you doing?!" Ayo shouted. I removed the safety.

"Mercy killing," I said as I pulled the trigger. Ayo froze in his spot. It all happened so fast. He didn't even have the time to protest for his friend… he was lying on the ground, lifeless.

I pulled Ayo before he got himself killed.

The first thing my father gave me when I returned was a slap on the face.

"You killed an Estrella!" he shouted. Ayo was beside me, still crying. "What were you thinking?!"

I stayed silent. Why would I even explain myself? I was sure he already made up his mind. That I killed Oli because of personal gain… but I didn't. I killed him because that was the better thing to do. If I left him there, who knew what those bastards might have done to him? For the first time in my life, I did a nice deed. And I was slapped for it. And people wonder why I was cruel.

My mother was silent, as well. She couldn't even look me in the eye.

"It's just a matter of time until they figure out what happened," my father hissed. His secretary went inside. I knew by then. The Estrella had already figured out how I killed their socially accepted child… why was they so mad, anyway? They still had that Belinda.

"I'll face the consequences," I said. I was tired of this life, anyway.

"No."

My chest constricted. Shit.

No. He can't do this to me! Not my brother! My eyes widened as my brother was being taken away.

"This is my fault! Take me instead!" I shouted and shouted but they wouldn't listen to me! I tried to take Ayo but even before I could go to him, he was already gone.

My father looked at me.

"This is your fault," he said, looking at me. "Your brother's death is on you, Augustus."

All I did was kill. As if killing would bring me back my brother's life. I hadn't been able to sleep a single wink since he was taken. I could still hear his screams. I could still see his tears. I shouldn't have asked him to meet me. It was my fault!

"Augustus."

I continued shooting the lifeless body in front of me. It still wasn't enough.

"What?"

He took the gun from my hand.

"Is it about your brother?"

I clenched my jaw.

"The one you sent to be killed?" I hissed.

"Do you want to take him back?"

My system froze.

"What do you mean?"

It had been five months. My father forced me to go to the school in his stead. He wanted me to pretend as Avo… and yet I was Avo. He said that I should continue what my brother left. That if the world knew about the lie we constructed, about how I was hidden, everything we worked hard for would be put to waste. And yet my brother's life didn't seem much for him!

"He wasn't killed." My hands turned cold. "He was being hidden."

"Then find him!" I roared.

"We can't… we tried."

My chest was heaving with anger. For five months, I thought my brother was dead, and yet, he wasn't?! Was I a toy to him?! Something he could control when things go shit?!

"Then try harder!"

I was about to rain on my father when my mother entered the room. She was wearing black… like she was mourning.

"We did," she said. "The head of the Estrella is now dead."

"What?"

"We killed them… the leaders."

My breathing became uneven. They killed Oli's parents?

"We wanted to take your brother back, Augustus, but they were adamant. They wouldn't give up the location."

"So you killed them?"

She nodded. And smiled.

"We will do anything for your brother… and you."

"But what will happen? Oli's dead... and now his parents."

My mother looked at me. Her eyes were cold—they felt arctic. I had always thought that my father was the ruthless one... but I was wrong. It was my mother. She had always been the one controlling everything. We were just pawns in her game.

"They have another heir, Augustus... you have to find her," she said, her voice was soothing, but it sent chills up my spine. "And then know where your brother is being hidden."

She cupped my face.

"And then bring her to me."

The first thing I did when I arrived at the school was to break up with Ayo's girlfriend. I couldn't stand her. I didn't understand what Ayo saw in her. I tried to act as normal as I possibly could, but I had no idea how Ayo portrayed Ayo... It felt like I didn't have my own self anymore.

I hid everything that might remind me of Ayo. I didn't want people to notice the difference. We were different—poles apart. And the *Dieux* noticed it, I knew, but there weren't saying anything. They pretended that everything was normal. How could Ayo be friends with these people? They're a bunch of pretentious bastards. Like myself. And I hated myself so much.

I knew that the Estrella would send Belinda here... here's the safest place. At least for now.

But before the Queen arrives, I better prepare myself. I had been walking around the school grounds, trying to memorize everything. And when I stumbled upon the secret passage, I stared at it. I didn't know how to open it. Ayo's diary only told so much.

"*Memento Mori.*"

I turned around and saw Lorenzo.

"You're not Avo," he said. I didn't say a word. "But your secret's safe with me."

He was about to walk away when I said, "Why?"

"I hate this place. I know you'll destroy it soon." And then he looked at me. "Consider this as a thank you gift."

"Do you know who closed the door?" I asked him.

He smiled.

"The ones who kill are the ones who have the most to gain," he replied.

And as months passed by, I learned that you can only block the secret passage from the inside. My insides felt cold as I remembered that day. If only they didn't block the passage, Oli and Ayo would've gotten inside alive. And I wouldn't have been in this hellhole. I'd find the bastard who planned this and make him pay for his life.

She's in.

That was the only message the admin relayed to me. It was from my father. And by then, I knew my target was already locked in place. All I had to do was to gain her trust… and then take everything that's mine.

The first time I saw her, she looked like she was lost. Of course she was clueless. She didn't even know that her parents were dead… and that she's the leader of the organization. She was clueless and naive. And that made her a better target.

"S-sorry," she said as she bumped into me. But I accidentally appeared in front of her. I didn't want to waste more time.

"Name," I asked, though, I already knew her name… and practically everything about her. I studied her day and night. I had prepared for this.

Belinda Ophelia Estrella. The Heir of Mafia Estrella. The Clueless Queen.

"Boe Estrella, *Deuxième*," she said.

She's hiding. She's playing the game. And I knew I should play harder.

"A-ano ba!" she said as she tried to get away from me. I dragged her to the house. I wanted to break her walls. Until when could she pretend? A *Deuxiéme*? How long did she think she could play that ploy? She's an Estrella. The only remaining Estrella. Everybody would soon know about her… but even before they could, I'd already have her.

"This is kidnapping!" she shouted and shouted, but no one helped her. Why would they? They all feared me. And why wouldn't they fear me? I already gave the students plenty of reasons to do so. "Why did you bring me here?" she managed to ask.

I stared at her. She looked so innocent, but I knew she was far from that… She's a monster, just like I was. But she didn't have to know that. I have to protect this monster in front of me. No one should trigger the sleeping monster inside her.

I didn't need another enemy. Not an Estrella. Not until I get my brother from them.

"Sit," I said.

"Bakit mo ako dinala rito?" she asked.

"I want you." To stay as naive as you are.

"What?" she asked, her face reddening. She was easy.

"You." I pointed at her. "I want you."

I had always appreciated my face… but not as much as now. I knew I could get her easily. She wasn't so bad. And Ella's being a constant pain in the ass. The only reason I was being nice to her was because my brother loved her. That's it.

"You're crazy," she muttered under her breath. "I'm leaving."

"Stay," I said and then stood in front of her. "Boe…" I mentioned her name. "Boe, right?"

I leaned in. She was staring at me. It's so easy to read her… and when I kissed her, I knew then that the Queen had already fallen.

"Mine," I said and then stared at her face.

Being Belinda's boyfriend was probably the most boring thing I had ever done in my life. She's so weak. She's so fragile. But I needed to take care of her. No one should harm her. No one should trigger the sleeping monster.

"Akala ko bawal tumawag sa labas?" she asked.

Why did she need to contact someone from the outside? Did she know about her parents? But she couldn't... I always had my eyes on her. Except when I was outside trying to look for Ayo.

Belinda's list of questions only grew longer. But I needed her to remain clueless. So when the night of choosing for the slave came, I chose Laurie.

"Keep her out of trouble," I warned her. She looked at me. Her family died. It was unfortunate, but I knew something was wrong with it. It didn't add up, but that's none of my business. "I'll kill you if anything happens to her."

And I meant it. I didn't want anything to happen to Belinda. It wasn't the time yet.

The time I spent outside had been longer than usual. Estrella's power knew no limit. They had control all over the place, even with the death of the head. That Sandra was proving to be a pain. She was controlling things until Belinda rose to power. But I wouldn't let her plans succeed. Once I find Ayo, their Queen's gone.

When I returned inside, Ella was already waiting for me. She was smiling.

"Avo!" she said and then hugged me. "I missed you..." she whispered against my chest.

I was tired from the trip. And whenever I was looking at her, I remembered how much my brother loved her. So when she held my hand, I let her... but little did I know that it would cost me my relationship with Belinda.

"Do we have a problem?" I asked. She had been quiet the whole time. And I didn't like quiet when it came to her. It meant she was thinking,

and I didn't want her to think. "Look at me," I commanded, but she kept her gaze down. "I said look at me," I repeated. "Do we have a problem?"

She stared hard.

"None," she replied.

"Then why are you pushing me away?"

"I'm not."

"Do you think I'm stupid?"

"No, but why are you asking stupid questions?"

I forced myself not to smile. Since when did she have this side? She's beginning to become entertaining.

"Boe…" I trailed. "Just tell me what the hell is your problem."

"Wala nga akong problema," she replied stubbornly.

"Okay, then. If we don't have a problem, then let's have lunch."

It was hard to act pissed when in fact, I was entertained. I liked this side of her… but I wasn't allowed to. Everything here was a mission. Breaking up with Ella, being in a relationship with Belinda, and finding the culprit behind the secret passage. Everything was planned.

And yet I was entertained. By her. Unbelievable.

"Why are you asking me this?" I asked her. Why was she so concerned with the reason why I loved her? Wasn't I enough? What's with all the questions?!

"Why aren't you answering me? Is it that hard?" she shot back.

She's got guts. But I had to put a stop to it. She shouldn't be triggered. Not yet.

"It was the first time I saw you," I began. "You looked pissed, and then when our eyes met, you looked really angry." I really liked her when she's answering back… I didn't like the good girl Boe. It was boring… I liked Belinda.

"You fell for me because I looked angry?"

"No… it's just that… you're different. From the people in this school. You didn't seem afraid. And it was… a sight."

She's a nutjob. She's like me.

"That still doesn't explain the fact that you dumped Ella for me. I don't understand, Avo. How can you dump someone you loved for years just because there's someone new you fancy? That doesn't even make sense!"

How would it make sense? Everything was a lie! And I didn't even like Ella! She disgusted me!

"In the kind of life we live, life is short. Why will I waste my time with Ella if it's clear that I want to be with you?"

"Because it doesn't make sense!"

"Why does everything have to make sense to you?" I said, teeth gritting in frustration. She's entertaining, as well as frustrating.

"Because I want to understand!"

"What don't you understand? I want you. You. What more do you want to know?"

She sighed.

"Maybe this is wrong. I don't know what possessed me to agree to be with you. I don't even know you, Avo… I don't know you."

Fuck.

I planned on giving Belinda some time to think. Her crazy side was beginning to show. I needed to do everything carefully. I didn't need her to become more questioning.

"If you want her to remain as she is, pry her away from Night."

I looked at Lorenzo in front of me. We were playing chess.

"What?"

He moved his knight.

"He's the knight."

My forehead furrowed.

"Then why should I be wary of him? He's supposed to protect the Queen," I said and then took one of his pawns.

"He's protecting his Queen," Lorenzo said. And then checkmate. He's good at this. "There are two Queens in every game, Avo. You should know that."

Lorenzo was something I had always kept close. He wasn't my friend, but I knew he just wanted the same thing as I. We both wanted to destroy this place. So when Belinda came back, I wanted to talk to her, but everything changed.

"What are you doing here?" Ella spat. "You're not with Avo anymore. You're not welcomed here."

She was gone for days… and then she returned. But something was wrong. Seriously wrong.

"But I am, Ella," she said and took a seat. She sat in the middle of Lorenzo and Night. In front of me.

"What?" Ella asked.

"I am Belinda Ophelia Estrella, *Dieux*."

My insides felt cold. The game just completely changed.

The Boe I hated was gone… the one in front of me was Belinda. She was so close to being the person I was trying my damnest to prevent her from becoming. I tried to get near her… but every time I did, she always knew how to take a step away from me. It was frustrating me in all levels!

My father learned about this and he was disappointed.

"We're so close to getting your brother back," he said.

"I know," I replied. "I'm doing my best."

"Then do better."

Chasing Belinda wouldn't cut it, so I changed tactic. I acted cold. I acted like I was over her… and she clicked the bait. But whenever she would look at me, I knew something happened to her. It felt like she was hiding something and I wanted to learn more about it.

"We're not yet done talking," I said, holding her by the arm.

Every time I tried to talk to her, she always found a way to get away from me. But not tonight. I'd get her back and make her who she was

before. She shouldn't be like this. She shouldn't be Belinda in the first place. I'd take Boe back.

"Let's talk tomorrow," she said.

"No," I said.

"Let go of me," she replied, closing her eyes. "Please."

"Stop asking me to let you go," I whispered. I wasn't done with you. You still had Ayo. Everything would just stop once Estrella falls. "You never let me finish talking," I breathed. "You always wanted to have it your way."

She nodded.

"Now, you shut up and let me talk." She was looking into my eyes. "Ella's special because she's my first friend—"

I tried to explain who was Ella in my life. She's a trash, but even before I could get to that part, she cut me off. Damn this woman.

"I don't want to talk about her."

"But I need to explain myself—"

"Enough talking," she said as she reached for my lips and kissed me. She was moaning like it was the end of the world. Shit! This wasn't a part of the plan! "Stop fighting this," she whispered against my mouth.

I looked at her. She was as drunk as I was.

"You'll regret this," I whispered. And I was going to, I knew.

"Probably," she murmured. "But that's for tomorrow to worry."

Last night was something unplanned… and something that I'd do again. Damn my father.

"Boe…" I called. I woke up from my sleep and didn't find her in the bed with me. I looked for her and she was crouched in front of the dresser. "What are you doing?" I asked.

"I… was looking for my shirt."

I was too tired. I just pulled her back to the bed with me.

The next days were pure unadulterated distraction. I kept myself busy with her body. I was sure Ayo would understand.

"What were you doing outside?" Belinda asked as I was busy caressing her soft arms with my fingers.

"Business."

That damned Sandra was annoying. She was good. I thought Estrella would crumble down without her, but she was proving to be really savvy.

"What business?"

"Family."

"Your sister okay?" she asked.

I stilled. For a moment.

"Yeah…" I trailed. "She's fine."

Ayo's fine… as long as Belinda wouldn't order anything against him, he's fine. I just needed to completely control her. She's the only key. And I learned it the hard way. Mafia Estrella wouldn't just bow down to anyone. Without Belinda's words, nothing would be done. She's the center.

"What's her name?"

"Arabella." *Alistair.*

"She's your only sibling?"

I looked at her. I didn't want to lie more. I wanted her to stop asking. But even before I could do anything, Fuji charged inside. And he was looking pissed.

"What did you do to her?!" he shouted.

I wrapped my arms around Belinda's shoulder and held her close to me.

"What are you talking about?" I asked him.

"Ella's missing!" Who cares?

"Maybe she went home," I offered as an explanation.

"I checked with her family. She hasn't been home since the beginning of the sem," Fuji said and then turned his fiery gaze at Belinda. "You were the last one with her."

"I wasn't with her," she said, enunciating every word clearly. "I didn't even talk to her. We hate each other. We're not friends."

"Oh, don't fuck with me, Estrella! You were following her towards the secret passage and then hours later, you came back and you passed through the main gate! Do I look stupid to you?!"

"So?"

I didn't understand anything. What the hell was happening?! I didn't give a shit about Ella, but I gave lots of shit with Fuji barging in and shouting nonsense.

"That doesn't prove anything, Fuji."

Fuji shut his jaw.

"She's been gone, Avo. She's not here. She's outside, and her family doesn't know where she is. You fucking know what this means." He looked at me. "This is another Avo in the making," Fuji spewed. Belinda froze beside me. "Oh, your little girlfriend doesn't know what a fraud you are? And a traitor?"

"W-what?" Belinda said, her lips quivering.

A smile dawned on Fuji's face.

"You don't know…" he trailed. "What a big joke!"

Belinda looked at me. Her eyes were asking questions I didn't want to answer.

"Avo? Ano'ng sinasabi niya?"

I closed my fists. If I had Ella with me, I'd probably kill her with my bare hands for what Fuji was doing.

"You don't know why he's here? He's here for you, Belinda Estrella!" Fuji shouted. I charged at him and pulled him by his collars. But that didn't stop the bastard from speaking. "Your family took his brother, and now, he's here for you!"

I punched him and made his mouth bleed but that didn't stop the fucker from speaking!

"He's lying the entire time, Estrella! He's playing you! And soon, he'll kill you! Like how you killed Ella!"

I continued to punch him until he lie bloody on the ground. That bastard! He ruined my plans!

"Totoo ba?"

Her voice.

"And don't lie to me, Avo... O kung anuman ang pangalan mo."

I stared at her. She looked different. This was what I had been avoiding all this time. The crazy's showing. This was bad.

"Why does my family have your brother?"

I didn't know if I'd tell her everything. If I lie, she'd know. If I tell her the truth, she'd go batshit crazy. I was cornered and no option was worth taking a shot for.

"He was the payment," I said. "For killing your brother."

The way color drained on her face said it all. I just messed up everything. If I didn't kill her tonight, I was dead sure that she'd get back to me. And then I would never see Ayo again.

"Your brother... killed Oli?"

As I nodded, I reached for the gun at my back. My hands felt cold against the metal. But this had to be done.

"Why?" she asked.

But even before I could answer, I felt a stinging sensation in my leg. Someone fucking shot me.

"Estrella."

Belinda's eyes darted at the bastard.

"Night," she said. Tears were flowing from her eyes... and when she ran to hug him, I wanted to murder someone. I wanted to murder Fuji for doing all of this!

"What happened?" Night asked.

Belinda couldn't answer. She was still hugging the bastard. Tears kept on flowing. I reached for my gun and pointed it at Night. He wasn't going to beat me at my own game. No way in hell!

"Don't even dare, Avo. Dare to get your gun and I'll shoot you between your eyes," Night threatened.

The side of my lips lifted.

"Are you innocent yourself, Nightly?"

We all looked at Fuji who was lying bloody on the floor. He was laughing. He's gone mental. But the look on Night's face gave it away. He's guilty of something!

"Shut up, Fuji!" Night growled. He pointed the gun at him and that gave me the opportunity to reach for my gun. I aimed for his arms and shot it. Bastard! "Shit!" he said as he whimpered in pain.

Belinda looked like she didn't understand what was happening. She wasn't supposed to know anything yet! And with the rate of how things were going, I was sure there's no way she'd give me Ayo! If there's one thing I learned about her, it was that she definitely knew how to hold a grudge.

"Ano'ng sinasabi mo?" Belinda asked Fuji. He was smiling. He knew he'd be dead, so he's just doing everything to take us down with him.

"The walls have ears, Belinda… Someone heard your cry for help," Fuji said. Belinda stilled. Her eyes began to water again. "Who do you think orchestrated everything?"

I didn't understand what was happening. Belinda looked at me.

"No," Fuji said. "Avo may be an asshole, but he wouldn't do that to you."

But before Fuji could say anything, somebody cut him off.

"I did it."

Chapitre Trente

I shook my head. No. This wasn't real. She wouldn't do that to me.

"No..." I trailed off. I looked at her. I refused to believe... not even when she was standing in front of me telling me that she was responsible for everything. "Shut up!" I shouted. She was my friend. Hindi ako naniniwala na kaya niyang gawin ito sa akin. I could accept others' betrayal, but not hers... She was my friend! I trusted her! I treated her as family! I was ready to protect her from everything!

Laurie shook her head and looked at me.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"You're lying," I said, continuously shaking my head. This couldn't be. Not her...

"I'm not. I planned everything... I'm sorry."

Why did they keep on doing this to me? Why did my friends keep on betraying me?

"You know I am in love with Night... and he's in love with you."

"What?!" I roared. "You're crazy!"

Laurie nodded and then looked at Night who was frozen beside me. Night was looking at Laurie. And Laurie was clearly lying. Night wasn't in love with me. He was playing with me. I was his toy. I was the one he manipulated just because he knew he could. I was the one providing him entertainment. He was toying with me. That was what I was to him.

I looked at Night, but his eyes were on Laurie. I could see fear in his eyes.

"Before you came, everything was good. Night's with me and Ella's happy with Avo. Everything was perfect… until you ruined it." Her lips were quivering. She was lying. This can't be the truth. "It was fine with me because you're with Avo… But you caught Night's attention. He's in love with you… and I hate it. But what can I do? You're an Estrella… and I'm no one. So I planned everything. I waited. When I became the slave of Avo, I was able to work with Cathy… and that was when I learned that she's in love with Fuji. But Ella had been a real bitch to her. She's the one who ordered the death of Cathy's family when she saw that Fuji was getting close to Cathy."

She's seven feet under, but that bitch could still make my blood boil with disgust. She deserved that kind of death. She deserved what I did to her.

"I worked with Cathy and made her tell me everything… When do you go out at night… During what time… Every little detail, Boe… I planned everything just so I could get rid of you…"

Umiling ako. Paulit-ulit. Hindi ako naniniwala sa kanya. She's lying… that's the truth.

"Shut up," Night said. Laurie didn't listen. I wished she'd stop saying this… But she only shook her head.

"And then when news about you breaking up with Avo went out, I knew you were going to go out to think. Because that's who you are. That's what you do… So I used Ella's name to convince Jude to do that to you."

My chest was tightening. I was reliving the memory again… How they touched me… How they molested me… How they tore my clothes… How I asked them again and again to stop… How no one listened…

They fucking destroyed me. They began this game that I was playing.

"You remember that night, Boe?" Laurie asked. "I was at the other

side... listening to your cries... I heard every whimper... I heard you say stop, but I didn't listen... because you deserved everything..."

Tears flowed. How... how could she do this to me? After everything I did for her? Was betrayal the only ending?

"Stop..." I whispered. "Tama na..."

I didn't want to listen to her anymore. I didn't want to feel this pain anymore... I was afraid of what I would do just to take this pain away...

"But then those idiots failed to do it. But a deal's a deal. I had to take care of Ella."

The cold wind enveloped us. My tears kept on flowing. I was becoming numb.

"What?!" Fuji shouted. "What did you do?!"

I couldn't breathe. I wanted everything to stop.

"You bitch! What did you do?!" Fuji shouted.

"You deserve it! You think I didn't know how you poisoned Boe before?! How you left her to freeze to death?!"

She said she was telling the truth, but all I could hear were lies. Naguguluhan ako. Hindi ko alam kung ano ang una kong dapat isipin... I shouldn't have gone here. I should've stayed in Japan. I shouldn't have gotten into this mess.

"You did what?"

Everyone stopped when Avo said a word. He still had the air of authority around him.

"I killed Ella! I killed her and then threw her body in the sea! Hindi mo na siya makikita!" Laurie screamed.

Nanlaki ang mga mata ko. What was she doing? Bakit niya inaako ang mga kasalanan ko?!

"You bitch!" Fuji roared and reached for his gun. He aimed at Laurie. But even before he could shoot, I snatched Night's gun and shoot Fuji's hand. The gun flew from his grasp. I couldn't let him kill Laurie. Not when I wasn't done with her! Not yet! Kailangan kong malaman kung bakit niya 'to ginagawa!

"Fuji had been trying to kill Boe every chance he got... but he couldn't... because Night's always around her," Laurie said. She looked at me. "See? Isn't he in love with you?"

"Shut up, Laurie!" Night shouted. "Shut up!"

Laurie shook his head. Avo pointed his gun at Fuji.

"You're gonna shoot me? Para ano? Para hindi ko masabi kung paano pinatay ng magulang mo ang magulang ni Estrella?" Fuji said and then laughed.

My heart stopped. No... Hindi pwede...

"You fucking asshole!" Avo shouted.

I felt like the world crumbled upon me. My parents... no... That can't be...

"W-what?" I didn't know it was possible to hurt worse than this...

Fuji looked at me. His blood was flowing. His face was destroyed... and yet with simple words. He destroyed me. "You really don't know anything, do you? You're pathetic, Estrella. You're in love with the person who's responsible for your parents' death. Fucking pathetic."

Dahan-dahan akong napailing. "No. My parents are alive."

"When was the last time you talked to them?"

Natigilan ako.

'They're busy, Miss Belinda.'

'They'll get back at you, Miss Belinda.'

'Your parents send their regards, Miss Belinda.'

Fuji smirked. "See? You're pathetic. You don't even know that your parents are dead. And here you are, being played by these fools." My chest was tightening. I couldn't breathe. I couldn't understand what I was feeling. "Pathetic Belinda. Pathetic."

He repeated it again and again. My head was throbbing in pain.

"Stop..." I whispered. "Stop."

But he didn't. "Your parents are dead." He kept on repeating it. Over and over and over again. My chest was heaving in pain. All I wanted was to make the pain go away. And Fuji telling me that my parents were

weren't helping my case...

'They're dead.'

'And they all played you.'

"Stop... make it stop..."

'They all lied to you.'

But he didn't stop. I took the gun from Night and shot Fuji in the head.

"Stop talking!" I said as I shot him over and over and over again. I didn't stop until the bullets were gone. I just wanted him to stop! And then there was silence... and more blood. Fuji's body was lying on the floor. Lifeless. His brain was scattered on the floor... but I didn't feel any remorse. If I could kill him again, I'd do it. I'd tear his flesh with my hands and throw him to the sea. I'd kill him the same way I killed the one that he loved. My breathing was ragged. But I felt peace... finally, he stopped.

I couldn't breathe anymore. I looked at Laurie. "You deserve to die," I told her. She wanted it. She told me she was responsible. I wanted to destroy everyone. Everyone who hurt me, they'd pay!

"Boe, no... " Night uttered my name. Fear was in his eyes. He loved her.

I looked at him. "Did you lie to me, too?" I pointed the gun at his face. I could never read him... even when I tried to, I could never.

But even before he could speak, Laurie cut in. "He didn't do anything!" she said. I looked at her. There was fear in her eyes. "I did it! I did everything!"

"Shut your mouth, Laurie!" Night roared.

"No! I did it!" Laurie looked at me. "You heard me! I planned it all! I asked them to rape you!"

Rape. That word. And then memories started to flood in. I could hear my cries... I could imagine my helplessness... I could only see red. I could only see blood... and I could only hear how she wanted me raped.

Slowly, I walked towards Avo and tried to get the gun from him. I

needed to shoot someone.

"No," Avo said. "She's your friend. Don't do this, Belinda. You'll regret this."

Lies. I had no friends… and I would never have any. I would never allow myself to feel the pain of betrayal again. This was the last.

"Give me the gun," I said, my voice low. I was looking at Laurie. I had been a fool for a long time, but I wasn't fool enough not to know that she was protecting someone… And I didn't care who it was. If she cared enough to lie for that person, she wouldn't care to die for her cause, too.

Avo remained still. I looked at him.

"I will kill your brother if you don't give me your gun," I said. I caught his attention and he willingly gave me the gun. He wouldn't care about Laurie's life, after all, he managed to play with mine. He didn't have a heart. He showed me no mercy… so why would he care if I killed everyone? He only cared about himself.

I pointed the gun at Laurie.

"No…" Night said, fervently shaking his head. "Estrella, don't do this!

I removed the safety. I prepared to pull the trigger.

"The price of betrayal…" I said as I watched my last friend fall on the ground. I turned and look at Night as tears began to cascade. His eyes were on Laurie. He wasn't moving. Didn't he believe that Laurie's already dead? So I shot Laurie again. In the heart. In the stomach. In head. I didn't stop until I was tired.

"Bitiwan mo ako!" I shouted as Avo tried to pry the gun away from me. But instead of heeding, he enveloped me in his hug. "You fucking traitor! You're next! I will kill you! I will kill your brother! I will kill your parents!"

He didn't. He hugged me. He tried to restrain me until I pushed the button that Sandra gave me.

I needed saving.

When I opened my eyes, I almost jumped from where I was laying. I looked around, but I wasn't where I was last night. Agad naghanap ng tao ang mga mata ko… And then there was Lorenzo. Agad na kumunot ang noo ko. Why was I with him?

"What are you doing here?"

He was reading a book. He closed it and looked at me. "You're awake."

"You didn't answer my question. Why am I with you?"

I asked for Sandra's help… and then I woke up next to Lorenzo. I didn't understand what was happening. My head was pounding.

"You asked for help."

"I didn't ask for your help…" I murmured. Natigilan ako. "Are you with Sandra?"

He didn't answer my question. But he didn't have to. Alam ko na may kinalaman siya kay Sandra. Hindi ko alam kung ano, pero aalamin ko.

"Why did you bring me here?" I asked instead.

My body was aching. I couldn't remember what happened last night… the fragments were blurry… but I remembered asking Fuji to stop… and I remembered seeing red.

"You killed two *Dieux*. There's a bounty for your head," he mentioned. I tried to stand, but he pushed me back to the bed. "Get some rest."

"I don't need rest!" I shouted. "Where are they?!" I asked. I wasn't finished with them yet! I wasn't done with Night. I wasn't done with Avo! I wouldn't stop until they're all gone! Until they all pay their debts! Until they get what they deserved for playing with my life!

Instead of answering my questions, he poured water in a glass and handed it to me.

"When you began shooting like a maniac last night, the admin was alerted. The families were alerted, too. They found Fuji's body and when

Ella wasn't found, it was assumed that she was killed, too." He looked at me. "You killed her, didn't you?"

I didn't answer. Did that even matter? She's dead already.

"And you killed Laurie…"

I clenched my jaw. "She's a traitor."

Napailing si Lorenzo. "If there's something that she is, she's loyal." Napatingin ako sa kanya. "And a martyr, too. She protected Night from you…"

Umiling ako. "No… She betrayed me…" I whispered. "She got what she deserved…"

"Are you convinced that it was Laurie who planned everything?"

Hindi agad ako naka-sagot. Last night… I was mad. I just wanted to get back at them. I just wanted to lash out. I didn't think anything through… I just wanted to get back at everybody…

"Did you even think for one second that she's capable of doing something that big?" he said. "She's a pawn, Belinda. A disposable pawn that you murdered."

"I don't want to talk about this anymore," I told him. I tried to stand, but I fell down. Inalalayan niya ako pero pilit kong tinanggal iyong hawak niya sa akin. "Leave me alone, Lorenzo! I need to find Avo!" I shouted. I wasn't done with him. He'd fucking pay for what he did to my family.

"He's in France," he replied, still trying to help me get up on my feet.

That bastard! "I'll kill him!" I shouted. Tinignan ko siya nang mabuti. Bakit niya ito ginagawa? He's Lorenzo. He's the last person who should be interested in this madness! I stared at him. What was he planning? What would he gain from this? And why was he doing this?

"Avo's only fault was that he killed your brother… That's his only sin."

Only? My brother's death was not significant?! Kinuyom ko ang kamao ko dahil sa sinabi niya. No words would ever make me forgive him for what he did. He took my brother's life, then I'd take a life in

return.

"The other things, that's not his fault," Lorenzo said.

I tried to level my breathing.

"Who did it?"

Seconds passed. He looked at me. Those eyes... he held so many secrets.

"Who do you think?"

I was racking my brain. Who would do that to me? Who knew enough and had enough power to control things and do that to me?

"I don't know..." My voice croaked.

"Nobody plans a murder out loud, Estrella..." he said, eyeing me. He crossed his legs and smiled at me. "You should've known..."

When I arrived at my house, I immediately looked for Sandra.

"Bring her here!" I shouted. I was mad. I was fucking mad. How dare she control my life?! Who did she think she was?! I paced back and forth until she was dragged in front of me. I picked the gun and pointed it at her. "Why did you lie?"

My heart was racing inside my chest. I was enraged. Looking at her face made me want to kill everyone in this room.

"Miss Belinda..."

"Answer my question!"

She was looking at me. She knew I already knew.

"I did that to protect you," she said. Her voice changed. It was like I was in front of a completely different person.

"Protect me?! You wanted me raped to protect me?!"

The way she stood before me, it felt like she was ready for anything. She knew it would all go down to this...

"You were falling for the enemy. I needed you to stop being weak."

Gusto kong matawa. Kailan pa naging pagiging mahina ang maging

tao? Ang maging normal?

"When you were sent there, I was assured that you'd be protected. As long as Alistair is held hostage, no one will dare mess with you. But then that Fuji tried to kill you. And for that, we killed Laurie's family."

Natigilan ako.

"What?"

"She's our eye. She's supposed to look after you..."

Biglang umikot ang paningin ko. I didn't know what to believe anymore... I didn't know who to believe anymore... Everything was a lie.

"Why do you think Night tried to keep you safe all this time? It's because if anything happens to you again, it's Laurie we will kill." My head couldn't contain everything. "The plan was to keep you there until your birthday... until you're ready to lead... but you're having feelings for Augustus. And that can't happen," she said. "The organization commissioned Laurie to help. She wasn't allowed to say no. Not if she wanted to remain alive... And when Night learned about this, he took over the mission to save her."

And I didn't have a heart... but the hollow place inside my chest kept on shattering. I killed Laurie... when I should've killed this monster in front of me.

"And the CCTVs?" I asked.

She smiled at me. Sumikip ang dibdib ko. Of c ourse. She could infiltrate the system... I had seen her do that.

"You're the enemy..." I whispered. "I trusted you."

And as she looked straight into my eyes, I knew she wasn't afraid.

"You shouldn't trust anyone... not even me," she said. I cocked the gun. "Go on, kill me... My mission's complete..." And a smile was forming. She wanted this... everything was for me to become this way... "I have no regrets, Miss Belinda. The monster has finally awaken."

And then another life was taken. I had already reached the point of no return.

A few weeks later and my birthday finally arrived. I had spent every waking moment looking for Avo. As long as his debts remained unpaid, I would never be allowed to rest. He killed my brother… and he killed my parents… And he crushed my heart. He tore it from my chest and crushed it.

"Miss Belinda." I turned to look at my new secretary. She was not as efficient as Sandra, but she wasn't a traitor. And I held her family hostage. One move to defy me and I'd kill her family in front of her. I didn't want a repeat of last time. I wouldn't risk another person betraying me "It's time."

Before my birthday, none of my parents' people followed me. Only then did I understand why Night kept on telling me that time was ticking and every second mattered. As soon as my birthday ticked, my word became law. They all followed me. When I was finally of age, I was introduced as the head of Mafia Estrella. I didn't understand the power my family held until now. With a simple word, I could take lives. With simple command, I could start a war. Only then was I beginning to finally understand everything.

"Angela," I called. "Any update?"

"I already said that we'd kill Ayo if they don't give Augustus up, but they won't accept, Miss Belinda. And with Night, he's in Germany. Do you want us to bring him here?"

Avo killed my brother… he killed my parents… there was no way in hell I'd let him live longer in this fucking world. He'd pay his debts… Every single one of them. And when I'm done with him, I'd tear him from limb to limb. And I'd be the last person he'd see until he dies… because that was what he deserved. He didn't deserve any mercy. Not after everything he did.

"No," I breathed. "I'll handle Nigh t myself…" I killed Laurie. He

might not say anything, but he loved her. I was certain of that. "But bring Ayo in."

As soon as I rose to power, anyone who dared to attack me ended up with their head cut from their body. I'd tear them apart. I'd watch them bleed and I wouldn't even weep. How could I? My heart was already taken away from me. I'd kill them without any remorse. I'd destroy them without holding back. Who would dare defy me? I controlled Mafia Estrella and the Del Rios wouldn't dare go against me. They said I was crazy… and maybe I was… And Lorenzo knew better. I helped him kill his parents, so he's the one controlling his own organization. Like I was, he was thrown in that school because he was different… but look who was ruling now. Those they deemed different.

And once I was done proving myself worthy of power, I tried everything to get Avo to go out from hiding, but nothing worked.

"Good morning," I greeted Ayo.

"What are we going to do with him, Miss Belinda?" Angela asked.

I looked at Alistair. He looked exactly like his brother. Those same eyes… that aristocratic jaw… Too bad.

"Bring me my knife…" I said as I stared at the person carrying the same face that I was willing to hunt to the ends of the earth.

Slowly, I walked towards him. He looked at me… that fear in his eyes. I thrived in that.

"You look exactly like your brother…"

I sat in front of him.

"Just kill me…" he said, his voice was so weak… Unlike his bastard of a brother. The one who destroyed every good thing in my life.

I smiled. "No," I said, shaking my head. "Death is too kind…" I raised my knife and held it against his face. "Death doesn't even begin to compare to what your brother made me go through…"

I stared at him, comprehending on what part I would cut first. I wouldn't kill him… not yet. I would cut him… little by little… just like how his brother destroyed me… I would begin with his fingers… and

when I was done, I'd go to his arms… and then his legs…

"This is nothing…" I said as I pulled his arms and forced him to open up his hand. "This is nothing!" I shouted as I cut his finger. I shouted and shouted until I cut his fingers. He shouted. He whimpered in pain, but I didn't stop. I would never stop. Blood kept on flowing, but all I could think of was how I'd get even with his family.

I would destroy them all.

I forced myself not to kill him. Not yet… I still needed him.

"Get a doctor," I told Angela when I was done cutting Ayo's fingers. "Make sure he doesn't die. I'm not done with him yet."

"Yes, Miss Belinda."

"And bring me a box, too, Angela. We'll be giving gifts to Avo…"

A small smile escaped from my lips. I couldn't wait until I have to send him his brother's heart… as a token for something he took from me.

ODERINT DUM METUANT

Chapitre Trente Un

The pleasant surprise that was my family's business never ceased to amaze me. Bawat araw, mayroon akong bagong natututunan. I had yet to master the trade of dealing drugs, at ngayon, nalaman ko na may hawak din pala sila sa human trafficking. It was like I was the daughter of Satan. Paano nagagawa ito ng mga magulang ko? I could deal with drugs… but human trafficking? It was a pain to stomach it.

"How was the transaction last night?" I asked Angela. Being the head of Mafia Estrella wasn't an easy thing. I had to deal with different kinds of people—all of them cunning to their very bones. I had to always be one step ahead of the game because if not, everyone was waiting for my downfall. Everyone wanted a piece of my family's business.

And I'd fucking kill them first before they could do that. This was the last remnant of my family. I would fight to death to protect this.

"It went well as expected, Miss Belinda. Mr. Chua was pleased with the quality of drugs, but he was asking for a cut back. Because of the current administration, the demand for drugs has declined," she explained. The president and his war on drugs was being a pain in the ass.

"I'll look into it," I answered. "How is our hostage?"

"He lost a lot of blood last night, Miss Belinda, but he's stable now."

I pursed my lips. Was I too much last night? His brother was testing my patience. He was proving to be really heartless. I had already sent him four of his beloved brother's fingers, but I had heard nothing from him. Wala lang ba sa kanya na unti-unti kong pinapatay ang kapatid niya? Would it help if I video myself while I was cutting his brother? Would it push him to hear his brother screaming for help? To hear his cries as I mercilessly butcher him piece by piece?

Did he want to see him bleeding? Would it help him get out from hiding?

"Alright. Make sure he's monitored 24/7."

I met with some of the suppliers and convinced them that the business was running smoothly. It was hard to convince a bunch of criminals. They were cunning as I was. But there was absolutely no need to fear. So long as I was leading, Mafia Estrella wouldn't go down. I would make sure of that. And besides, Lorenzo was with me. He owed me.

After that, I was escorted home. I didn't enjoy people tailing my every move, but I learned to appreciate the safety. After all, there was a bounty for my head. Although Laurie claimed that it was her who killed Ella, Ella's family was still suspicious. How could someone like Laurie kill a *Dieux*? But it was only a suspicion. Hanggang wala silang ebidensya, wala silang makukuha sa akin. And if ever they get an evidence, what could they do? I was at the top of everything. They were my pawns. Everyone.

"Brief me about the plan, Angela," I said as I was sitting. It had been two months since that awful night happened. I didn't want to prolong my agony. I needed to see Avo. I needed to collect his debts. Hindi ako makatulog tuwing gabi. I could always hear my parents screaming for justice... I could see Oli asking for help...

He fucking killed my family. I had no mercy left for him.

"We will send some of our best men in France. We already have the blueprint of their mansion, so it is easier to infiltrate their system," paliwanag ni Angela. I listened to her complete plan. It wasn't the best—she wasn't as efficient as Sandra, but she would do. Every time I would

think about that traitor, my blood boils. She was the one who triggered everything.

She wanted the monster? Well, she got one.

"After that, Mr. del Rio's men will accompany us back here in Manila."

I nodded, still digesting her plans. "Do you think we can trust the del Rios?" I asked for her opinion.

"For this plan? Yes. It will benefit them to have the *Ostenhaimers* taken down… But for the others, I don't think it is safe to trust them, Ms. Belinda. Lorenzo del Rio may be quiet, but like he always says, nobody plans a murder out loud."

She was right. Although Lorenzo wasn't directly involved in what happened to me, I still couldn't deny the fact that he played a part. He stayed quiet. He chose to keep everything to himself. He chose to watch while everything was burning down to ashes. He's a master manipulator… but I couldn't deal with another enemy at the moment. I needed to focus all my attention on bringing the *Ostenhaimers* down.

"Thank you, Angela," I said and then dismissed her. I spent another hour reviewing the reports. Although I wanted to focus on my business with Avo, I knew I needed to take care of my parents' associates. I still needed to prove myself—that I wouldn't crumble down under pressure. The people were fucking misogynists. Just because I didn't have a dick, didn't equate to me being incompetent. I always felt like I needed to continuously prove myself worthy of being in control. Chauvinist pigs, that's what they were.

After I was done working, I proceeded to Ayo's room. It had been months… and his fingers were slowly disappearing. Maybe I needed to up my game to scare his bastard of a brother from hiding.

When I entered his room, I saw that he was awake. He had this hobby of pretending that he's asleep whenever I tried to visit his room. He didn't exactly like me—which was understandable given that I chopped six of his fingers already.

"You're awake," I said. He looked at me—the hatred was very palpable. "Do you want to eat?"

I sat on the couch and crossed my legs. I had my entire afternoon free.

"The steak of the new chef is to die for," I said. He still remained quiet. "By the way, my people are going to France this week to capture your brother. Any tips?"

And when I mentioned his brother, it was like I opened a black hole. Kahit tahimik si Ayo, alam ko na may pakielam siya sa kapatid niya. Kaya kahit gaano ko siyang pahirapan, hindi pa rin siya nagsasalita.

"You're a fucking devil," he hissed.

I smiled and then closed the magazine that I pretended to read. "Oh, darling, I never denied that."

"What do you want? You already have me!"

He was tied to the bed posts. He tried numerous of times to take his life, but hell if I would let him. Hindi ko siya papayagan na mamatay nang ganun-ganon na lang. He needed to feel hell—to taste it. Wala akong pakielam kung hindi siya si Avo. Wala akong pakielam kung kapatid lang siya ni Avo. Lahat ng malapit kay Avo, damay sa galit na nararamdaman ko.

"Don't think too highly of yourself, Alistair. You're nothing but a hostage," I said, staring into his eyes. "Once I get your brother, you have no use to me."

His teeth were gritted. "Oli was right. You're crazy."

Bigla akong natigilan sa sinabi niya. They told me I was crazy. They told me I wasn't stable. Iyon daw ang dahilan kung bakit buong buhay ko, nasa Japan ako. Kung bakit hindi nila ako hinahayaan na makalapit sa sarili kong kapatid. I was even a threat to my own self.

"If Oli were alive, I'm sure he'd hate you." My jaw clenched. "You're despicable!"

I crumpled the magazine I was holding. Ayo looked at me. I knew he

knew that he just hit a sore spot. I hated talking about my family. I hated the fact that they were ashamed of me. I wanted to destroy everyone who knew about that.

"Shut up," I said, my voice low.

"You're a monster. They should've just killed you when you're younger. You bring death to everyone —"

"Shut up!" I shouted. I stood up next to his bed and glared at him. My breathing was deep. I was feeling that madness again. "Shut up!"

"You're a monster! You killed your own parents!" he shouted at my face. I grabbed the pillow and placed it on his face. He tried to fight me, but I was much stronger than him.

"Shut up! Shut up!" I shouted and shouted as I tried to suffocate him. I just wanted him to shut up! I didn't kill my parents! I didn't kill them! It was Avo! It was all Avo's fault! I would make him pay for everything that he did! Every fucking single thing! My hands were shaking and my eyes could only see red. I couldn't breathe. I just wanted to make him stop! I didn't want to hear him saying that I killed my parents!

"Ms. Belinda!" I heard voices. They were prying me away from Ayo. They removed the pillow from his face. He was pale as a ghost. "Check if he's still breathing! He can't die!" Angela said.

"Don't touch me!" I hissed to the people restraining me. I calmed myself down. I lost control again. Ilang beses na sinabi ng doktor na kailangan kong kontrolin ang sarili ko. Whenever I get mad, my eyes could only see red. I get out of control. I do things impulsively. And even though he wouldn't say it, I knew something was wrong with me. That's why I killed Ella. That's why I killed Laurie. I had this undeniable lust for blood.

The feeling of killing someone... it's empowering. It was playing god—controlling who goes on living and who stops breathing. I get to decide.

"I'm okay," I told Angela. She was looking at me. She knew about my

condition. She knew what to do whenever I lose control. I looked at Ayo. He was having a hard time breathing. Good. I didn't kill him… just almost.

Umalis na ako sa kwarto ni Ayo bago kung ano pa ang magawa ko sa kanya. I spent the remaining time studying the other businesses of my parents. The list was endless. But I knew I needed to take care of everything if I wanted to stay in power. The people around me were all hungry for power. They would gladly take me down, given the chance. And I wouldn't give them any.

When night fell, Lorenzo came to visit me.

"What are you doing here?" I asked him. He only visited whenever he needed something from me. He was a Utilitarian in every sense of the word. But it was beneficial to me. I didn't need his friendship—I just needed to know that if ever I need him, he'd help me. After all, it was me who put him in the power he was basking in.

"I have a news," he said.

My eyes automatically darted on him. "Avo?" I asked. He was the only news I was willing to hear about. He was the one I spent the last two months of my life finding. And I would gladly spend the remaining finding him.

"No," he replied. "Better." Who was a better news than Avo? "I found Night."

Chapitre Trente Deux

There was an unfamiliar feeling in my hollow chest when Lorenzo mentioned his name. Night. Tuwing ipipikit ko ang mga mata ko, naaalala ko pa rin ang mga nangyari. I could still see at the back of my eyes how he looked like when Laurie died in front of him… How tears fell from his eyes when she died. How I felt like I robbed him of his life.

He denied it over and over again. He didn't want to admit to himself that he was in love with Laurie. But his eyes betrayed him. It gave away what he was feeling—the way he looked when I pulled the trigger. He hid his feelings to protect her—and she lied to protect him. Love killed them both. It was a weakness—something I didn't want in my life. Not anymore. Not when my chest was but a hollow place.

"What about him?" I said, my breathing even. I didn't want to be interested in Night's affairs. He helped me. He had been a friend when I needed one. But I didn't do friendship anymore. It was just a waste of time. It was a waste of emotion. It was a waste of trust.

"He was last sighted in India."

Agad na kumunot ang noo ko. "Ano'ng ginagawa niya sa India?"

Lorenzo shrugged. "Maybe he's hiding."

"From who?" I asked. No one's looking for Night. Kung meron, sigurado ako na malalaman ko. I had eyes and ear everywhere—something I took from the family of Mondragon when Lorenzo and I

took them down. Served them right for playing with our lives. And it didn't do anything for anyone. Sa pananatili ko roon, ilang buhay ang nawala. Puro kasinungalingan. Kapag wala kang kapangyarihan, gagawing laruan ang buhay mo ng mga nakaka-angat sa iyo.

"His family."

"And why is he hiding from his family?"

Lorenzo smiled at me. "Curious, aren't we?" Hindi ako sumagot. I wouldn't click on his bait. I knew him better, and I knew better than to play his game. Because in Lorenzo's game, it's always him who wins. "Let's find out ourselves, then."

"I'm not going after him, Lorenzo," I told him. I didn't want anything to do with Night anymore. He's not a part of my plans. It was only Avo I was after.

"Who says it's you who's going after him?" And I knew it; he's going to find Night and bring him to me. It's how he played his game—always two steps ahead of everyone.

Mabilis na lumipas ang mga araw. Naging abala ako sa pag-aasikaso ng mga negosyo ng mga magulang ko. I had to kill some men who threatened my authority. I didn't care about it anymore. My hands were already bloody from all the people I killed—from the lives of my friends I took. I didn't even feel anything killing those who didn't matter in my life. It was no more than pulling a trigger… just a child's play.

I was in a room full of the top men in the organization. Tahimik akong nakikinig sa plano nila. I wanted to know everything down to the last details. I wanted to ensure that this wouldn't be all put to waste. I already lost two months of my life for nothing. Kung hindi pa rin matutuloy ito, hindi ko na alam kung ano'ng parte ni Ayo ang ipapadala ko sa kapatid niya. I might have to start being more creative.

"According to our intel, Avo is staying in the room in the 3rd floor of their mansion," Johann said, the leader of the men. "There are at least ten men manning the floor. Four of them, directly in front of the target's room." Ipinakita niya sa screen ang blueprint ng mansion ng mga

Ostenhaimer sa France. That blueprint costed me a small fortune. But we needed it to polish the plan. I didn't want my men to walk into an ambush. I didn't want to waste more time on Avo. It had been too fucking long.

"Our intel will open the gate at the east side of the estate for us. From there, we'd have to take down the men by hands. As much as possible, we'd have to avoid using guns in order to not trigger their security," paliwanag ni Johann. "According to the blueprint, there's a hidden door on the west side of the estate, but only one person at a time can enter. It will take us roughly five minutes to get enough men inside."

My fingers were gently tapping on the table. The plan sounded solid. Johann was worth all the money I spent on him—he was the top of his class in the army. I had to offer him a small fortune to get him as the head of my men. After all, security is a top priority lalo na kung maraming tao ang gustong pumatay sa iyo.

"After that, we will have to crawl in the vent that will lead us to the third floor," sabi niya at pinakita ang ruta na kailangan nilang daanan para maka-rating sa kailangan nilang puntahan. "And from there, we have to disarm their men."

"What about the CCTVs?" I asked. I had developed the habit of checking CCTVs.

"Joey will disarm the CCTV from outside, Ms. Belinda. It will show a footage from hours ago, so that the control room won't be alarmed," he answered.

That's my only concern… Nagpatuloy si Johann sa pagpapaliwanag sa mga mangyayari. I rested my case. Alam ko na magagawa nila iyon. I only hired the best men.

"Do you have any more concern, Ms. Belinda?" Johann asked after he was done briefing his team.

I clasped my hands and smiled. "Don't harm Avo," I said. He's mine to harm.

Iniwanan ko na sila para pumunta sa kwarto ko. I gave an instruction

to Angela to hide Ayo away from me. Tuwing naiisip ko iyong mga sinabi niya sa akin, gusto ko siyang patayin. I wanted to cut him to pieces and bleed him dry. I wanted to peel his skin off his flesh until he begs me to stop. I wanted to make him feel the pain he made me feel. I wanted him to stay silent forever.

But I needed him… hanggang hindi ko pa nakukuha ang kapatid niya. He should thank his brother for staying in hiding for so long. Dahil kung hindi, matagal na siyang patay. Kasama ng mga magulang niya na papatayin ko.

I rested early. Tomorrow, they would all head to France. I was a bit hesitant to send Johann with them. It's hard to find a competent guy. I was still having minor problems with Angela. She's just not as good as Sandra. Sandra had always been two steps ahead and she worked fast. With Angela, everything was at worm's speed. But Johann wanted to spearhead the operation personally.

I took sleeping pills. I couldn't sleep at will. I wanted a dreamless sleep—I didn't want the terrors of my nightmares to haunt me in my sleep. I didn't want to see their faces… to watch as their blood slowly cover the ground I was standing on. Until they take their dying breath… I didn't want that to follow me in my sleep.

Laurie...

Cathy...

Oli...

My parents...

When morning rolled in, I was quick on my feet. Magaan ang pakiramdam ko dahil hindi ako binangungot. Pagdating ko sa baba, agad na napa-kunot ang noo ko dahil nakita ko si Lorenzo.

"It's early in the morning, Lorenzo. What are you doing here?" I asked as I took my seat.

"Found Night," he said as he took a bite of the pancake. Why was he eating breakfast at my house? He had always said that he hated the presence of his parents. They're already dead. He had the entire mansion

to himself, but whenever he could, he always chose to eat here.

"I told you I don't care," I replied.

"You need him," he said.

"I doubt it. I can take care of myself." I didn't need Night to play the devil's advocate once again. I knew he did everything to trigger the sleeping monster inside me. To wake up the crazy. I didn't need him playing with my life again. He could do whatever he pleases. I wasn't after him.

"Night knows things."

"And so are you," I shot back. I really didn't want to involve Night in my business. I'd rather that we live separate lives. Nagawa namin sa loob ng dalawang buwan. It's not impossible.

The side of Lorenzo's lips rose. "But he knows the *Ostenhaimers*..." He knew he got my attention when he mentioned that last name. He knew I was desperate to get back at them. That I'd stop at nothing to extract revenge. "You may control Asia, but Night's family already has a stable connection in Europe."

"My men will get Avo and bring him here," I said.

"Do you think it's that easy?" he asked. "You'll be sending your men to their death, Estrella."

I gritted my teeth. I hated it when he's telling me what to do. But he knew better... I knew that at least. I had always been impulsive with my decisions, and innumerable consequences followed because of that. I had learned to practice restraint.

"If the *Ostenhaimers* managed to infiltrate your system and have your parents killed, do you seriously think that going to their territory is a good idea?"

Natahimik ako sa mga sinabi niya. He placed his hands on the table and looked at me.

"You'll lose your men, Estrella, and to be frank, you can't afford that. Everyone's waiting for a chance to kill you. Don't give them ammunition."

I stared at him. "What do you propose to do?" He smiled. He knew he got me. With simple words, he could twist my mind upside down. I hated it, yet, I couldn't do anything against it.

"Since Night is in hiding, take him under your care."

"And why would I do that?" I asked. I didn't want to see him. Tapos gusto niya na rito tumira si Night kasama ko? Nababaliw na ba siya?

"He knows people, Estrella. He can get Avo. He can bring him to you." I clenched my jaw. "Night has been playing this game longer than you… use him."

Huminga ako nang malalim. "Alright," I said. "But if he betrays me… I'd have your head."

He stared at me. I was calculating his every movement. I wanted to learn how he thinks. I wanted to know how his mind works. He's a mystery that I wanted to unfold. I had seen a glimpse and I wanted to know more.

"Alright," he replied. "I better watch him closely, then."

He's still playing a game. And I wanted to know what were the stakes.

Hours passed and the operation was called off. I felt a little bit relieved. If I lose my men, my security would decline by a great deal. And that's a risk I wasn't willing to take. I had no regards with my life—but not until I get what I wanted. To serve justice for the lives taken from me. That's what I was living for.

Tahimik akong naghihintay sa pagbabalik ni Lorenzo. Sinabi niya sa akin na susunduin niya si Night mula sa pribadong airport na pagmamay-ari niya. I didn't want to come. I still didn't want to see Night. I was reminded of Laurie every time I see him. And Laurie might have betrayed me, but she was the closest thing to sister that I ever had. And she was just protecting someone.

Minutes passed by slowly. My nerves were getting the best of me. I forced myself to calm down.

"Ms. Belinda, Mr. del Rio arrived," someone said. I ordered her to direct her to my study. My system was a wreck. I didn't know why I was

feeling this way. It was just Night. The person who knew the monster inside me. The person who pushed me to the dark side, when I was already standing at the edge.

Dahan-dahan. Naririnig ko ang bawat yabag nila. My breathing hitched. And when the door opened, his eyes met mine.

"Night..." I said. But his eyes told another story. It was cold and ruthless—and it proved me that he's indeed the enemy I should be wary of.

Chapitre Trente Trois

His face… he looked different from the last time I saw him. The mischief in his eyes was gone. The glint disappeared. He almost looked dead. His eyes were cold—almost arctic. He was far from the person I used to know… but who was I to judge? When it was me who changed so much; when it was me who was willing to go to the ends of the earth just to get what I wanted. When it was me who was willing to erase anyone who would stand in my way.

I wanted to step closer, but was afraid to do so.

"I'll leave you two to catch up," Lorenzo said, backing down. He was clearly enjoying this. He enjoyed every chance he got to play with the emotion of those around him. I had always thought that I managed to kill everything inside me… that I was nothing but surviving for the sake of getting even. But every time, I was proven otherwise. I hated it.

And then I heard the door shut. We were alone. And I couldn't describe what I was exactly feeling. Ilang segundo ako'ng nakatayo lang sa harap niya. Words failed me. Words betrayed me.

"What do you want?" he asked after minutes of deafening silence. He didn't only look different, he sounded different, too. What happened to him? What happened during the two months he was away?

I stared at him, determined to read what was hiding behind those cold

eyes of his. Was it Laurie's death? Was it the death that changed him? I wanted to ask. I wanted to know... but I didn't have any right. Not when I was the one responsible. Not when I was the one who took away his love from him—the reason behind why what was left of his humanity abandoned him completely.

"How are you?" I asked instead.

"As you can see, I'm fine."

I pursed my lips. I wasn't used to Night being like this. He had always been a warm person despite all the charades he was playing. But looking at him, it seemed like life was drained out of him. "Are you fine?"

He looked back. "Who are you to judge if I am fine?" he shot back. "We're both at the same page, Boe. We both lost."

My lips quivered, but I managed to keep myself calm. I would only lose if I engage. And there's nothing good that would come my way if I let him get inside my head. I already let him once, and look where it got me? In this mess that he created, but the hole I dug deeper. And we were both prisoners who couldn't escape.

"I don't lose, Night. I get even."

He was standing before me. He was inches away from me. But still, I could feel him so near. "Aren't you tired of fighting?" he asked.

"Are you?" I shot back. "Because I am not. I won't get tired until I get revenge for what they did to me... For what they did to my family." I crumpled my hands to stop myself from feeling. Emotions are weakness; they would only tire me down. Kailangan kong maging malakas para malabanan lahat ng gustong magpa-bagsak sa akin. I would never give them the satisfaction of seeing me crumble down.

Hindi siya nagsalita. I couldn't read him anymore. He's acting far different from the Night I knew... He's different from the cunning guy who used to tell me to use everything to my advantage.

What happened to him? What changed?

"Are you tired?" I asked him.

"There's no point in fighting, Estrella. It's futile," he said with those

dead eyes of his. What happened when he was away? Or was it because of Laurie's death? Was he blaming me for what I did? I wanted to ask him all these questions but was afraid of the repercussions.

But so what if he's mad? Would it even change a single thing? I was already contented with having only myself. I found it hard to trust anyone again. I always ended up disappointed. I didn't want to subject myself to that kind of disappointment. It kills you little by little.

"There is," I replied. "Not when Avo's still hasn't paid for his debts."

"You have his brother. Isn't that enough?" he asked.

My jaw clenched. Didn't he understand what Avo took from me? He took my brother away from me! He took my parents away from me! He played with my feelings! He made me a fool! I couldn't and wouldn't be able to find it in my heart to forget everything he did to me. My blood boiled with anger whenever I thought of him. His name was enough to send me into a rampage—and it's always Ayo who was at the receiving end. I had lost count of the number of times that I almost drove the knife to his chest… to feel as his heart begins to stop beating. I had wondered how it would feel to take his life—the way his brother slowly took mine.

"No." I met his stare. I looked at him. I wanted him to at least feel half of the rage I kept inside me. "I won't stop until he's begging for me to stop. And even then, I won't stop. Because he took everything from me."

He took everything. And I would stop at nothing to get everything. Hindi ako maaawa. Hindi siya naawa sa akin.

"And then what? Do you think you'll feel whole again after that?" he asked. He's different. He's different from the Night I knew. If he were the same as before, he'd be the one to push me over the edge—not the one to appeal to the sane side inside me.

"Who mentioned about being whole, Night?" I asked back. "What I am are pieces of the person I used to be. Before he shattered me beyond recognition."

After my talk with Night, I let him do whatever it was that he wanted. I wouldn't restrict him inside my house, if he didn't want. That's what I

could do for him as much. Dahil hindi ko naman itatanggi na nung nasa loob ako ng AdM, he looked after me. In his own crooked way, but he still looked after my welfare. I could do as much.

I quietly resumed to my duties as the head of Mafia Estrella. I restricted myself and again, ordered Ayo to be brought far from my reach. I could just snap anytime. I could hurt him anytime. I could kill him anytime. Tuwing naaalala ko ang mga ginawa ng kapatid niya, gusto ko siyang saktan. Gusto kong sa kanya ibuhos lahat ng galit at poot na nasa puso ko. I just wanted to release all the anger I had inside me.

As I was in the middle of my works, Lorenzo requested for a video-call. I humored him since my eyes were already tired with all the technical aspects of the family business. Sa ganitong panahon mas gusto kong nasa tabi ko si Oli. He was the one trained for this kind of life.

"What?" I said upon answering.

"What's with the mood, Estrella?" he asked. He was quietly sipping his cup of tea. He didn't even look stressed at all. Sabagay, sanay naman na kasi siya sa pagpapalakad. It was only I who was clueless about basically everything. I felt handicapped, but I still couldn't ask for help. I didn't want anyone around me to see my incapabilities. It would only further their reason to bring me down.

"Why did you really bring Night here, Lorenzo?" I asked. I wanted to know his motives... even though asking him pointblank was nonsense. He's playing games. He had always been.

"I told you already," he replied. "He's the one who could bring you who you wanted."

I stared at him, trying to read those eyes that lie. "Is it, really?"

The side of his lips rose. It was like he was impressed that finally, I was learning. But how could I not? He had lied to me every single step of the way. Wasn't it only proper that I learn? After all the lies and hypocrisy?

"Yes and no." And again, my heart started beating frantically. I had loved his game, the same way I hated it. I loved the thrill. I loved the

possibilities and the surprises. These were the reason why I couldn't pull myself away from him… even though he was bad news. Lorenzo del Rio was nothing but bad news. "Yes, he can bring you Avo. He knows many things, Estrella. You just have to know how to control him…" he meaningfully said.

How could I ever control him? How could I when every time he looked at me, he remembered how I killed Laurie? Possibly the only woman he ever loved?

"And no, it's not the only reason," he continued.

"What is it?" I dared ask.

"It's for you to discover."

He was beginning another game and I just willingly took the bait.

"Good luck, Estrella." I kept my mum. "You have more control over Night than you know."

Pagkatapos kong makausap si Lorenzo, ilang minuto akong nanatili sa opisina ko. I had to consider all options. Not just because I wanted to win the game, but also because I didn't want to lose… again. The stakes of losing was higher than the glory of winning. I had already lost too many things. I didn't want to add another pile of the list.

Hindi ko alam kung nasa loob pa ng pamamahay ko si Night. Had he left earlier, I wouldn't stop him. I owed him that much… but after what Lorenzo told me, my curiosity was stirred. Ano ang alam ni Night? I always wondered about that. Night was only a puzzle I couldn't solve because he wouldn't let me. Every time I tried to get close, he'd take a step back. Hindi ko siya magawang malapitan noon dahil akala ko, siya ang kaaway. I was stupid. I fell for the enemy.

But now? I would know everything. I would crack Night open. I would do anything to know what he's been hiding all this time.

Tumayo ako mula sa kinauupuan ko at naglakad palabas. Nang makarating ako sa kwarto kung saan ko iniwanan si Night, huminga ako nang malalim. If he's here, what would I ask him first? There were so many things I wanted to know… but there were also so many things I

was afraid to know. It was unnerving.

Pero… paano kung wala na siya? Would I run after him? Would I do anything to convince him to stay with me? Even after killing Laurie? Was I willing to go that length?

But all my doubts were erased when I opened that door. Because he was there, staring at me.

"You're still here…" I said, my voice barely audible.

"I have nowhere to go," he replied, drowning me with his stares. "You're the only one left."

Chapitre Trente Quatre

Days passed since Night began to stay with me. I hadn't talked to him after he told me that I was the only one left. Probably because I didn't want us to talk about Laurie. Because if there's one thing that I could mourn about, it's Laurie's death. I shouldn't have killed her. And she should've just kept her mouth shut. Alam niya ang tungkol sa akin. She knew how unstable I was, yet she kept on triggering me. If only she didn't say anything, if only she kept mum, I wouldn't have dared kill her.

But she was protecting someone... and the price for that was her death. She chose it. Ginusto niya iyon... but I could still feel the weight of my decision on my chest. Her death would continue to haunt me... lalo na ngayon na malapit lang sa akin si Night.

"Ms. Belinda..." Angela said, standing before me. I looked at her. I was busy trying to think of alternatives. Our drug-related business was slowly waning. I could afford to lose it since it's not a hot commodity at the moment. Masyadong mainit ang mata ng gobyerno sa droga kaya naman mas makababuti kung pansamantala muna kaming tumigil hanggang nasa amin pa ang mga mata... But if I do that, it meant that I had to up our human trafficking business. And my stomach wasn't prepared for that. It's one of the very few lines I didn't want to cross.

I only kill those who wronged me. I only have no mercy for those

who hurt me.

"What?" I asked Angela.

"Can I speak freely?"

"About what?" She was looking at me, seemingly uneasy. May problema na naman ba? Akala ko ay maayos na ang lahat.

"About Mr. Klampenberg…" she trailed. With the mention of Night's last name, she immediately caught my attention. I put down my pen and focused on her.

"Go on," I replied. I had been talking to Lorenzo too much already. I needed another perspective. I didn't want to completely drown in his world. I didn't want to obsess with his game. After all, I had my own game I needed to play.

"I don't know anything about him, but according to Sandra's—"

Agad ko siyang pinatigil nung narinig ko ang pangalan ni Sandra. "What about Sandra and Night?" I asked, my curiosity aroused once again.

"There were files left by Sandra," she mentioned. "I found them in the hard drive while I was doing a clean up, Ms. Belinda," Angela explained. Agad kong pinakuha sa kanya ang kopya nung mga sinasabi niya. Even from seven feet below, Sandra still managed to amaze me. Kung siguro ay inalam niya lang kung hanggang saan lang ang pwede niyang gawin, buhay pa rin sana siya. But she stepped behind the line. She pushed way too hard.

Because even me, I knew the limits I shouldn't ignore. She was too cocky for her own good.

Tahimik kong binasa ang mga binigay sa akin ni Angela. At habang nagbabasa ako, hindi ko maiwasan na mapahanga kay Sandra. Where in hell did she manage to get these files?! These were top secret files! And some looked like they've been buried, but somehow, Sandra managed to unearth these information. Pakiramdam ko ay nahihilo ako sa dami ng nalalaman ko. I felt like I was invading Night's privacy… his deeper and inner most thoughts.

Maybe this was what Sandra used. Because with these files, she could control Night. Hindi biro ang mga nakalagay dito. Ito ba ang dahilan kung bakit nakokontrol niya si Night? Na kahit isa ring *Dieux* si Night, nagagawa ni Sandra na pasunurin siya? Was that the reason why Night was willing to do Sandra's bidding? To keep all the secrets buried?

At paano si Lorenzo? Sandra also had a hold on him. Dahil nung nagising ako, si Lorenzo agad ang nakita ko when in fact, it was Sandra that I called for help. And I knew that Lorenzo's not one to do anything without something in return. It must be something big to make him follow Sandra. Kailangan ko ring malaman kung ano ang hawak ni Sandra laban kay Lorenzo. I didn't know if Lorenzo would turn on me but if he ever did, I would never go to a war without
a gun.

And eventually, they'd all betray me. Alam ko. It's the only path we're all headed to.

Night was sleeping when I went to his room. I stood by the door and watched him sleep. Something about him definitely changed... he lost something. Could it be that he lost his heart? But he said he didn't have any. Or was that another pretense he was playing? I didn't know what to believe anymore when it came to the people around me. They were all pretentious.

His head kept on turning. He was mumbling something incoherent. Nagdesisyon ako na lapitan siya.

"Laurie... Laurie..." he kept on mumbling. My heart constricted inside my chest. I felt a pang of pain. I wanted to walk away. I wanted to stay far away from him. I didn't want to be reminded of what I did. I wanted to bury it in the past where it belong. But how could I? How could I ever forget it when the only person who could remind me of that was right in front of me?

Para akong naka-tulos sa kinatatayuan ko. Naka-tingin ako kay Night habang binabanggit niya ang pangalan ni Laurie.

"No..." he said... and then a tear fell from his eye. I turned back and

walked away.

When morning rolled in, I couldn't look Night in the eye. Tuwing makikita ko siya, maaalala ko kung paano siya nahihirapan sa pagkawala ni Laurie. And I hated this feeling. I hated feeling anything. I wanted to have nothing but apathy in my heart. I didn't want to have space for anything else that didn't matter.

The food was served. Tahimik kaming kumakaing dalawa. I kept on stealing glances and he didn't seem as bothered as I thought he would be. Gabi-gabi ba niyang napapanaginipan si Laurie? Was that the reason for his abrupt change? Was he being haunted for her death?

I had so many questions and didn't have any heart to ask any of them.

After I was done eating, Angela briefed me with today's agenda. Pinipilit ko na makinig pero ang atensyon ko, nahahati dito at kay Night. I could feel his stares transcending. Why was he like this?

"Thank you," I told Angela when she was done. I looked at Night. He still was staring at me. It was unnerving. "What?" I asked.

He was looking—those orbs containing more mysteries that I couldn't wait to get my hands on. "Nothing," he replied.

"It's not nothing. You were staring."

"I still am," he said, not breaking the stare. I pursed my lips and tried my best to remain impassive. He wouldn't beat me at this game. Not anymore.

I stood up and went to my study. If he wouldn't say anything, I wouldn't pull it out of him. I learned better than to force people to say things they didn't want to. They oftentimes just sprout lies. And I didn't need lies. I didn't need another life taken because of lies. So if Night didn't want to say anything, let him be. He'd tell me when it's time.

I was in the middle of reviewing the reports when I felt Night coming in. I ignored his presence and continued reading. Ilang minuto na siguro

siyang naka-tayo sa harap ko. "You're doing it all wrong," he said. Agad na napa-tingin ako sa kanya. Dahan-dahan siyang lumapit at pumwesto sa likuran ko. I caught my brèath when he stood too close for comfort.

After all this time, I was still affected. I couldn't have anyone too near. I couldn't have anyone too close. Because every time I do, I was reminded of that night. Pakiramdam ko hanggang sa pagkamatay ko, dadalhin ko pa rin ang takot na 'to.

"You can do this easier," he said and then opened the folders. Mayroon siyang mga pinaliwanag at pinakita. He fixed some of the loopholes. He troubleshooted those that I had yet to find.

"How did you know all of this?"

"I'm set to lead the business," he replied, still focused.

"Then why are you here?" I asked. He didn't say anything. Tahimik niyang ginawa iyong mga dapat kong gawin. At sa kalagitnaan ng paggawa niya, biglang bumukas ang pinto. Agad kaming nakita ni Angela. And there was fear in her eyes. Did she fear that Night would divulge the secrets of the organization?

"He's safe," I told her. Tinignan ko si Night. "He has nowhere to go."

And I didn't know if it was true. Why didn't he have anywhere to go? He still had his family. He still had an organization to lead. But why was he here? Why did he seem like he was hiding?

And why was he helping me?

"Right, Night?"

He put down the pen and then looked at me. "I have nowhere… and no one," he said, again, sending shivers down my spine.

Chapitre Trente Cinq

The morning started earlier than usual. I quickly did my routine and when I got out, I was quite surprised to see Night already at the dining area. For the past days he stayed, he always opted to stay in and wallow alone inside the confines of his room. And then now, he decided to grace me with his presence, early in the morning?

"Good morning," he greeted. The crease on my forehead just worsened. "Coffee?" he offered.

"I'll have tea, thanks," I said. After that, he quietly resumed back to eating. Akala ko ay tapos na ang pag-uusap namin para sa umagang iyon pero mali pala ako. I was already starting to really think that something was wrong with him. He acted distant. He acted like he wasn't Night. And although I badly wanted to know what happened to him during the months he was away, a voice inside me kept on telling me to just let him be… That maybe this was his way of grieving for the love he lost.

And what if he told me that everything was because of Laurie? How do I respond? How do I address it when it was a problem that I didn't even want to think about? That amongst all life taken by me, hers was the only death that I regretted. That hers was what made me lose sleep at night.

Her death was an uncharted territory… and I preferred it to remain

that way. Hindi ko kayang pag-usapan ang pagkamatay ng isang babae na parehong naging mahalaga sa aming dalawa.

"Can you please bring Nutella and bread?" I asked one of the helpers. I noticed that Night wasn't eating much. He really lost weight and he didn't look too healthy. I didn't know why I was this worried for him… maybe because I ought to look after him because maybe it was my fault why he's this lost.

And until I didn't know what his problems were, I'd look after him. Kahit para kay Laurie. Because no matter what I do, I couldn't bring back the dead.

Nang dumating na iyong Nutella, pinadala ko iyon sa harap ni Night. Naka-kunot ang noo niya.

"Ayaw mo rin ng Nutella?" I asked. I really didn't know his preference when it comes to food. I remembered him eating almost everything. Nutella lang talaga ang natandaan ko na paborito niya. And lollipop. But that didn't sound like a good breakfast food.

His eyes softened a bit when he looked at me. I didn't want to look him in the eyes without him reading what was on my mind. We probably were both mysteries to one another… and I'd like to remain that way. Kahit ngayon lang, at least.

"Thanks," he replied. I nodded.

Tahimik lang kaming kumain. We didn't do small talks. And I believed that we're already past that stage. We already killed someone together; we already buried evidences together. Ang dami na naming napagdaanan ni Night… and this was probably the reason why despite everyone telling me to just abandon him, I couldn't. Not completely. Because even though he might betray me in the end, I knew that he was the one who helped me when I needed it the most.

And for some fucked up reasons, I trusted him… probably more than I could ever trust myself.

Nang malapit na akong matapos kumain, agad na lumapit si Angela para ipaliwanag ang mga kailangan kong gawin ngayong araw. During

the first few times, my head kept on aching dahil sa dami ng mga kailangan kong gawin. But as weeks passed, I already got the hang of things. Because to enjoy the power, I should work for it. To remain at the top, I should work from the bottom. And I wouldn't let everything my parents' worked hard for go to waste. I wouldn't give my enemies an ammunition. Lalo na at naghihintay na lang sa ulo ko ang pamilya nila Ella at Fuji.

Surely, my death would be the highlight of their lives.

"Where are you going?" Night asked.

"Work," I replied. I had tons of work waiting for me. I needed to start doing them if I didn't want them to pile up.

"Can I come?"

Mas lalo lang lumawak ang kunot ng noo ko. Since when did he start to ask for permission? Ang pagkakakilala ko sa kanya, ginagawa niya kung ano ang gusto niya. He didn't have any regard for rules. He lived to break them…

"Why?" I shot back. Angela reminded me to be wary of Night. That he's an enemy… that no matter how tamed he looked, he's still someone who could not be trusted. And I wanted to believe her. I wanted to be wary of Night. But there's something about him that would always, always draw me in. He had always been enigmatic.

But what if this was all a part of his devious plan? What if he wanted to hurt me for killing Laurie? Papabayaan ko lang ba siya? Would I let him because I knew that I was the one at fault? That I mercilessly pulled the trigger when I knew that Laurie was only covering up for something?

But they wanted this! They wanted me on the edge. They wanted me blind with rage. They wanted me reckless. And when finally I abandoned regard, was I the one to blame for what they wanted me to become, in the first place?

"I'm bored."

"Surely, you can find something to entertain you, Night…" I replied. "There are lots of women to choose from," I suggested.

He looked at me. "I'm not interested in women anymore."

I arched my brow. "Change of heart?" A smug smile appeared on his face. My heart leaped. This was too familiar. This was the Nightly I knew.

"I don't have a heart, Estrella. I thought we already made that clear."

"I know. Thanks for reminding me, " I said, not wanting to remind him that he had a heart—before I took that away. "But I can't bring you with me."

"Why?" he asked.

"I'm doing business."

"And you suck at it," he replied all too quick. "I saw you do your paperworks, Estrella. Give it a year and Mafia Estrella will crumble before your eyes."

My jaw clenched because of what he said but I couldn't say anything back. He was right. I wasn't having a grand time dealing with all the technical aspects of my parents' business. This was all new to me. This was all unfamiliar. I wasn't raised to handle this. This was Oli's turf… but with him gone… with my parents gone… it was only me. I had no choice but to continue everything they left.

He took a step forward. I didn't move.

"Let me help," he said, looking at me. His voice was enticing… he was becoming Night again—the dangerous one. Maybe even more now.

I kept silence. He went nearer.

"I will do the business… you can watch me if you like," he whispered in my ears. My heart was racing inside my chest. God, Laurie! "I will behave, Belinda…"

I pursed my lips and tried to remain calm. I looked at him, my jaw still clenched.

"I don't trust you," I said.

The side of his lips rose up. "Good. Because I don't even trust myself."

"I'll kill you if you do something I don't like," I warned him.

"Oh, you'll like everything that I'll do, Belinda," he replied, those eyes boring a hole in me.

"Don't push it, Night."

He smiled. "Why? Are you affected?" he said and then run a finger on my arms. Naramdaman ko ang pagtaas ng balahibo sa braso ko. "Do I affect you, Belinda Ophelia Estrella?"

I slapped his finger away from me and created a distance between us. "Stop it," I said. A smile remained on his face. I wanted to wipe it away! "You're in my territory and you'll do as I bid. Malinaw ba, Night?" He nodded, but it didn't seem like he understood what I really meant.

"Do you understand?" I repeated.

"Yes..." he said.

"Good," I said. Nagsimula na kaming maglakad palabas. " You ride in the other car," I instructed him. It's not smart to ride in the same vehicle. Because even if he's with me, even if he's hiding away, he's still Night. He's still the heir of one of the biggest organization there is. His life counts as much as mine does.

"I'll ride with you," he said.

"I thought we made it clear that you're going to follow my orders?"

"Not when they're not smart,' he replied. "I'll stay with you."

"I can protect myself, Night," I said.

"No, you don't," he replied, looking at me. "There are enemies everywhere and you don't even see them."

At saka siya pumasok sa loob ng sasakyan. Sino ang kaaway? Ano ang sinasabi niya? I wanted to ask him but he wouldn't say anything, I was sure. The only enemies I have, I knew all of them. Fuji's family, Ella's family, and Avo... and everyone he ever loved. They're all my enemies. And I would stop at nothing to make sure that every debt is paid.

"I will talk to Mr. Cheng," I said when he was busy reading the last quarter's report.

"These are all wrong. You're being duped," he said. Agad na kumunot ang noo ko.

"What?"

Ipinakita niya sa akin at ipinaliwanag ang ilang bagay na ilang beses

akong naguluhan dati. Biglang sumakit ang ulo ko dahil sa mga ipinaliwanag ni Night. And I couldn't believe Mr. Cheng would do that to me! He had been partners with my parents for so long!

"That old bastard. He'd been working with my parents for years," I hissed. He had duped me of millions!

"You're not your parents, Belinda. You don't automatically get the respect they're given. You earn it."

Tinignan ko siya. "Don't you think I'm already doing that?"

He shook his head. "You're letting pride get in the way. It's making you blind."

"Why? Because I let you in even when I shouldn't?"

I couldn't read his face but I was glad that we're finally talking. Days of silence was a torture. There's a lot to learn from him... and about him. And Lorenzo said that Night could help me bring Avo out from his hiding. Hindi ko alam kung ano ang meron si Night o kung ano ang alam niya. Even Ayo wasn't enough to bring that bastard out.

"You still don't know how to play the game."

Clenching my fist, I tried to remain calm. I shouldn't be angry. I should refrain from being angry... Ito ang palaging pinapaalala sa akin ng doctor ko. Dahil kapag galit ako, nalilimutan ko lahat. I become blind with rage and the only thing that matter was to release all the anger inside me. And I didn't want a repeat of the last time. I had no one left to kill anymore. And the only ones I wanted dead were far from my grasp.

"There's no game anymore, Night. We ended the game."

"There is always a game, Estrella. And you're an unwilling participant," he said.

"My life is not a game!"

"And so is mine, but we're still both playing," he replied.

"I don't want to play this game, Klampenberg. I just want to kill Avo and his family. That's my only concern!"

And when he stared at me again, I felt like drowning. Those eyes... that pair

of eyes that once helped me… might someday betray me. No one should be trusted. Not him. Not me. Not anyone.

We were all criminals. We all are.

"I'll bring him to you."

I looked at him.

"I'll bring you Avo and maybe after that, we can both finally rest."

Chapitre Trente Six

I let Night take the wheel. He was right. He knew more about the business side of the organization. He was practically raised and born to lead an organization. This all seemed natural for him. Manipulating people into his liking was one of his talents—a talent he always used on me. And I just let him again and again. Maybe I should just back down for a while and watch him as he moves. Baka mas marami akong malaman sa mga gagawin niya.

Last night, as he talked to Mr. Cheng, I didn't know how he exactly did it. He didn't say anything outrageous and yet, I saw Mr. Cheng trembling in fear. Maybe he was really just born to terrorize people. He was good with words—he always knew how to use them to his advantage. And before the night ended, the missing money were deposited on my account. Up to the last stolen centavos.

"How do you do it?" I asked him.

"What?"

"Making people do what you want them to do."

He shrugged. "I don't know. They just do," he replied and then continued working on my business. I worked closely with him—just to make sure that he wouldn't do anything funny. Kahit na pinapabayaan ko siyang pakielaman ang mga dapat na trabaho ko, hindi ako papayag

na lokohin niya ako. This was another subject. This was my parents' hard work and labor. I wouldn't let just anyone mess with it.

I could let them get away with messing with my head... but not this one. Not when this was the only remnant left. Not when this was all I got that could remind me of what I lost.

Habang abala si Night sa trabaho, iniwanan ko muna siya sandali. I had copies of all the papers he was dealing with. All transactions needed to be sanctioned by me before it would be put into action.

"Watch him," I told Angela. There was fear in her eyes. "He won't harm you," I said. Night wasn't some animal who would kill when told. I hated the expression on Angela's face.

"Yes, Miss Belinda..." she said, but I could still hear faint fear in her voice. Annoying. This was one of the times when I wished Sandra wasn't a big of a traitor bitch at sana ay buhay pa siya.

Mabilis ko siyang tinalikuran at saka naglakad papunta sa kwarto ni Ayo. It had been a while since I last saw him. But I was sure that he was well taken cared of. After all, I wanted his death to be watched by his brother. I was trying my best not to butcher him every time he'd tell me that I was crazy and that I was the reason why my family got killed.

"Hey, Ayo," I greeted as I entered his room. He was tied to the bed posts as he still kept on trying to commit suicide. Didn't he know that without my permission, he couldn't die?

As soon as he heard my voice, his jaw clenched. I took that as a great seeing you again.

"How are you?" I asked. "It had been days since I last saw you."

"You mean since you last tried to kill me?" he hissed.

I chuckled. "My fault... or maybe yours. You keep on triggering me when you know that I get triggered easily, Ayo. So, really, who's at fault?" I asked him. I just noticed the new improvement in his room. The walls were now covered with foams. "Your room looks like that of a mental patient, Ayo," I said.

"Yeah. You should be in this room, too. It fits you," he said.

I crossed my legs and rested my back against the couch. "Maybe I'm a crazy bitch, but this bitch holds your life. Kaya kung ako sa 'yo, umayos ka, Ayo," I said in a warning tone. My day was wonderful and I'd hate it if he'd ruin this for me. "Anyway, I have a news for you."

I reached for a bottle water and opened it. He kept silent. He's like his brother most of the time. Pareho silang tahimik... but I was sure that they're both demons in their own right. If I had known better, Ayo planned to bring Oli out during the day he died. Plano niya na dalhin ang kapatid ko para mamatay. Because there were three of them and it didn't make fucking sense that it was only Oli who died. They should've all died.

"One of these days, you'll see your brother again."

"You can't and won't find him. You're too stupid for him," he said.

I smiled. "Who said it's me who'll find him?" And just then, I finally got his attention. Naka-tingin siya sa akin. Napa-ngiti akong lalo. "You know Night, right?" Nanlaki ang mga mata niya. Mas lalo akong natutuwa sa reaksyon niya. "He's with me now. And he promised me he'll bring me your brother."

His jaw clenched and I could sense fear in his eyes. Mas lalong lumakas ang hinala ko na mayroong alam si Night tungkol sa mga *Ostenhaimer*. Mas lalo kong gustong panatilihin si Night sa tabi ko. I could use him. I would use him until I bring Avo and his family down. And I would stop at nothing until they pay for the death of my family.

"And you trust him?" he asked, his voice low.

"Who do you want me to trust? Ikaw?" I said and then laughed a little.

"He'll betray you."

"That's my problem if he will," I replied. "But what matters most to me is murdering you and your family."

Mas lalong kumuyom ang panga niya sa mga narinig niya. Mas lalo niya lang akong binigyan ng dahilan para ilahad sa kanya lahat ng mga balak kong gawin. It had been long since my last kill... I tried to control myself. My doctor said that if I don't, I would lose myself in the process... and maybe I wouldn't be able to find me anymore. That the longer I

indulge my rage, the harder it would be for me to take control of myself.

So I had been saving all the rage for when Avo and I finally meet again.

"I just have a question, Ayo. I still don't know who I am more angry at. Kung sa mga magulang mo ba o sa kapatid mo… Should I kill you and your brother in front of your parents? Or kill you and your parents in front of Avo?"

I just wanted to inflict the most pain to the person who wronged me the most. I didn't just want revenge—I wanted revenge in its highest form. In its most painful form. I wanted them to feel the same way I felt. I wanted them to tremble in fear. I wanted them to beg for their life. I wanted to destroy them in the most cruel way possible.

And I wanted to do it with my own hands. I wanted their blood on my palm. I wanted to take their last breath. I wanted my smile to be the last thing they'd see before death takes them away.

Everything in their right moment. Every payment for life taken.

"It's so hard to choose…" I crossed my legs and then cocked my head. "Oh, bakit ang tahimik mo ngayon? Do you finally realize that you'll die soon, Ayo?"

His lips parted. "I'm praying for your soul. You're still alive but your soul is already burning in hell."

Natawa ako sa sinabi niya. I had been called devil for so many times that I already lost count. "Good for you. And pray to your god to save you… to save you from me."

It was already night time when I woke up. My head was pounding real bad earlier. It had been happening for quite some time now but I didn't want to put too much thought into it. Aayos din ang pakiramdam ko kapag nakuha ko na ang gusto ko.

"Where's Night?"

"He's in his room, Miss Belinda," Angela replied.

"What did he do earlier?"

"He just did all the paper works and then resigned quietly in his room afterwards," she said and I nodded. Night, so far, had been true to his words. Or maybe it was because he knew that one wrong move would make me really mad. Maigsi ang pasensya ko sa mga tao na gusto akong traydurin. Even Lorenzo knew that. It's the reason why he had been tiptoeing around me these days. I was a ticking bomb. I get triggered easily.

Naglakad ako papunta sa kwarto ni Night. I knocked twice before I opened the door. And there he was, sitting on his bed and reading something.

"Do you need anything?" he asked.

I shrugged. "Do I only come when I need something?"

He nodded. "You kind of established that I'm only here to follow your orders," he said and then I sat down on his bed, just a few inches away from him. I peaked at what he was reading. It was a newspaper.

"I didn't know you're interested in current affairs," I commented. I never pegged Night as someone who would give a damn about the country. He had always portrayed himself as someone who couldn't care less about the things that do not concern him.

"I'm not," he replied.

"Then why are you reading the newspaper?"

He closed the newspaper and then faced me. For a split second, I held my breath. His hair was wet and he seemed like he just emerged from the bath. He was wearing a pajama bottom and white shirt. His face was pale and his lips bloody red. I forced myself not to stare too much.

"I'm contacting someone," he said.

"Who? And how?" I asked. I reached for the newspaper and I saw nothing unusual. It was the same bullshit—same as everyday. The headlines were still of the same level of shittiness. I saw nothing out of the ordinary.

He took the newspaper from my hands and then opened to the ads page. There were numerous ads and nothing was different, well, at least for me. He reached for the pen and then encircled numbers from the right side of the page.

"What are those?"

"Number," he said.

"Of whom?"

"Someone."

"Someone important?"

He nodded. "Someone who can bring Avo to us."

I held my breath again. Napatitig ako sa mga numero na binilugan niya. "Why do you communicate using the newspaper?" I asked. There were lots of ways to communicate with someone. Lots of easier way to do so.

"It's safer this way," he said. "If anyone get suspicious of him, he could die."

"And you care about him dying? I thought you didn't have a heart?"

He looked at me, and again, I tried my best not to get distracted by his red lips. They were bloody red. Too hard not to be noticed.

"I don't just discard people, Belinda. When they still have use, I take care of them," he answered.

It made me think. Was this the reason why he took care of me while we were in the school? Because he still had a use for me? Pero kung oo, ano naman iyon? Was this a long con? He had been protecting me for months... I didn't know what it was that he really wanted. It was hard to know when it's with Night. He just gives me glimpses of his thoughts... never letting me fully in.

And like moth to a flame, I kept on getting burned. But in the end, I craved for the pain.

"And this person... how can he get Avo?"

He reached for an envelope on the nightstand and then handed it to me. Agad kong binuksan iyon at halos lumundag palabas ng dibdib ko

ang puso ko nang makita ko ang mga litrato ni Avo. I almost crumpled the photos as I looked at his face once again. I could feel my chest tightening at the sight of him.

"He's not in France like you thought," Night said. My eyes didn't leave Avo. How dare he live normally when all he caused me was pain? How could he still breathe when he killed everyone I ever loved? How could he stomach living when all he ever did was to be my death?

"He's currently in Germany," Night continued.

My throat felt dry. My lips quivering. "Bring him to me."

"I will," Night promised. "I only have to do something to make it happen."

"What is it?" I asked, ready to help him do anything. The moment I saw Avo's face, I was reminded again of everything that I lost because of him. If only he didn't kill Oli… if only he didn't take my family from me, I wouldn't be like this. I just wanted to live. I just wanted to become normal. But he took everything from me.

He destroyed me. He destroyed every good fiber I had inside my body.

"I need to go back to Germany."

I locked eyes with him. "No," I responded too quickly. "You're not leaving."

"I need to see my parents," he replied.

"Then call them," I said. "Or send someone to tell them what you need to say. You're not leaving this place, Night."

He looked at me and then sighed. Was I being difficult? Wasn't this his fault? He said I shouldn't trust him. Why was he expecting so much from me when he gave me nothing to be assured of?

"I'll come back," he said.

"I don't trust you."

"And you shouldn't, Belinda. For your sake, don't fucking trust me. Not for a second," he said.

"Then why do you think that I'll let you leave? When I have no

assurance that you'll come back?" I asked him. I had always said that I would never force him to stay with me. His freedom was the only thing I could give him. It's the only thing I could afford to give him. But how could I let him leave me now? When everything I ever wanted was so near?

"I'll come back," he repeated.

"No—"

But even before I could finish my sentence, he leaned in and kissed me. My heart stopped. I felt like my whole world stopped when his lips touched mine. There was an unfamiliar feeling in my chest. Something unknown. Something strange.

His lips were on mine for a few seconds. Just a few seconds but I felt my world spinning around. I didn't know what to make of what I was feeling. He kissed me.

And I felt like I betrayed Laurie for feeling this way.

"What—"

"I'll come back for you. Trust me on that."

Chapitre Trente Sept

The kiss kept me up all night. I couldn't sleep. Not even a blink. Thousands of things ran on my mind and every single, I always ended up thinking about Laurie. It felt like a nightmare, only I was fully awake. I felt like I betrayed her for feeling this way… for being affected like this. Because why would I be affected like this? It's Night! Si Night na unang beses ko pa lang nakilala, alam ko na na dapat ko siyang iwasan. He's trouble. He's danger. He's someone I shouldn't even let close to me… and yet I kept on breaking my word every time.

And when morning finally rolled in, I was tempted to just stay inside the fortress of my room. I didn't know how to face Night after the kiss. I didn't know how to act around him after the kiss.

Why was I even acting this way? Why was I making a big deal for just a kiss? I already did more than that with— shit. Umaga pa lang, sira na ang araw ko.

I braced myself when I prepared to go out. I made sure I looked presentable—I always am presentable but I just wanted to be sure that I didn't look like a complete mess. I also dabbed concealer under my eyes to hide the fact that his kiss kept me awake the entire evening. Night didn't need to know that. He needed not to be aware of how I was affected by a single, chaste kiss.

With my hair arranged to perfection and my face concealed from any hint of staying up all night, I went out of my room. Dahan-dahan akong naglakad hanggang sa makarating ako sa
dining room. And my face fell when there was no trace of Night.

"Where's Night?" I asked Angela.

"He's outside, Miss Belinda."

"Outside? Who told you to let him out?!"

"He said—"

I was about to give Angela hell for defying my orders when I heard a familiar voice.

"Hey." Agad akong napatingin at nakita ko si Night. "Is there a problem?" he asked.

I pursed my lips and shook my head. "Nothing," I replied and then looked at Angela. "Leave us."

Agad na umalis si Angela. In fact, she almost ran away from me. She knew that me getting mad would do her no good. She was already disappointing me in almost all aspects, at ngayon, simpleng pinapagawa ko lang na siguraduhin niya na hindi makaalis si Night sa lugar na 'to ay hindi niya pa magawa? She's proving to be more of a liability than an asset.

"Saan ka galing?" I asked Night.

"Out."

I arched a brow. "Who gave you the permission to go outside?"

"And since when did I become your captive, Belinda?" he asked, his forehead creased. "Do I need your permission to breathe, too?"

His sarcasm was making it irresistible to slap him in his face. I forced a smile on my face but it turned into a grimace instead. "Why did you go out?" I calmly asked. I didn't want to be angry. I shouldn't be angry.

"I went for a run," he said and then I finally noticed that he was sweaty and he was wearing a pair of running shoes.

"You could've told me first," I said.

"Why are you being paranoid? I told you, I won't leave."

He was looking at me and I broke the stare. I didn't have the strength to stare at him. I was starting to feel nauseous from everything. Agad akong tumalikod at nagsimulang maglakad pabalik sa dining area. Maybe food would make this day a little better.

Naupo ako sa kabilang dulo habang nasa kabilang dulo naman si Night. I had always abhorred how long our dining table was. It was ridiculously long for a family of four. Pero ngayon? I could only thank my parents for this table. The distance between me and Night made it easier to breathe.

"Do you need coffee?" he asked.

"I drink tea," I replied.

"You sure? You look like you need caffeine in your system." I raised a brow. "Did sleep last night?"

I caught my breath in my throat, but quickly removed whatever I was feeling. "Yes, in fact, it's the best sleep I had in weeks."

"Really?" he asked, the side of his lips raising. "Dreamt of me, then?"

"If you're in my dreams, it won't be called a dream, Night. It will be categorized as nightmare," I shot back.

His smuggy smile just grew smuggier—and only him could ever do that. I wanted to rip that smug smile off his face! He's really good at destroying someone else's morning!

"Really, then?" he asked, his brow arched.

"Really," I snarked and then reached for the plate of bacon and then gave myself a plateful. Maybe I'd die of cholesterol kaysa hahayaan ko na ipaalala sa akin ni Night iyong nangyari kagabi. He just kissed me out of nowhere! It was uncalled for! I was being lenient with him because I knew he was healing himself from Laurie's death and then this was what he would do?

He's really still fucked in the head.

"Belinda," he called my name. Tinignan ko siya. "I set a meeting with the Valderrama. They'll make a better partner than Mr. Cheng."

"And who is this Valderrama?"

"Biggest supplier."

"And why will I trust this guy?"

"Woman, Belinda. Valderrama is a woman."

I raised a brow again. "One of your trysts?"

"One of the many," he said, smiling smugly. "But it's all in the past."

"Don't involve your sex life in my business, Night. I don't want to be business partners with the women you fucked," I said, putting down my utensils and wiping the side of my mouth with the napkin. I didn't like the idea of it. Nakaka-bastos sa alaala ni Laurie. It's the least I could do for her after I destroyed everything. I killed her. Sandra murdered her entire family. The least I could do was to make sure that Night would fall in the right hands. And not in the hands of one of the bimbos he used to fuck.

Tumayo ako at nagsimulang maglakad papasok. I was about to open the door to my room when Night held my arm.

"Get your hands off me."

"What's your problem?" he asked.

"Nothing," I replied and then tried to pry his hand. "Bitiwan mo ako."

"Why are you acting like a jealous girlfriend, Belinda?"

Tinignan ko siya. Halos malaglag ang panga ko. "Do you hear yourself, Night? Why will I be jealous?" I asked and then ridiculously laughed. What did he want to prove?

"Because you like me," he said, his voice low.

"You're crazy," I said and then turned the knob and attempted to go inside the comfort of my room. Pero bago pa man ako makapasok, hinila niya ako pabalik at saka hinawakan sa bewang ko. I was standing too close. He was too close. "Let me go."

"Are you affected?" he whispered.

"No," I answered.

His thumb began to caress my waist and I was restricting myself to feel anything. His other hand was on my arm and tracing circles on it. Unti-unti siyang lumalapit sa akin. Papalapit nang papalapit. I held my

breath. Or maybe for a second, I forgot how to breathe.

"Really?"

"Really," I replied, gulping down whatever I really was feeling.

Akala ko ay hindi niya ako titigilan pero bigla niya akong binitiwan. He took a step away from me and then smiled.

"Go," he said. "And take a shower."

"I just took a bath."

"Take a cold shower, Belinda. You need it," he said and then winked at me. God! Why was I even living with this guy?!

I stayed inside my room the entire day. I just asked Angela to bring my laptop to me so that I could work in peace. Sinubukan kong magtrabaho pero nakita ko na nagawa na ni Night lahat. Who knew that that guy was organized? He did everything accordingly. I really didn't expect this from him. I thought all he ever cared about was fucking.

He also made a short list of the people I needed to re-evaluate. He really knew lots of things.

"What can I do for you?" Lorenzo said when he answered my video call.

"What do you know about Night?"

"Why?" he asked.

"Because he's messing with my head again!" I shouted in frustration. He had been here for a week and he already made a mess of my life! I spent months trying to fix everything tapos dadating siya at guguluhin na naman ako?!

"What?"

I sighed and looked at Lorenzo. He was far from who I thought he was. He was uptight inside the school but outside? He's more of a free spirit. Marahil ay dahil nawala na ang mga magulang niya. We were poles apart. I would do anything to have my parents back... while he did

everything to remove them from his life.

"He kissed me!"

"That's it?" he asked.

"What do you mean that's it?! He kissed me, del Rio!" I fumed. Every time I would remember how he kissed me last night, I wanted to strangle Night. He shouldn't have done that! He may be a lot of things, but you should never kiss a friend! Kahit na malabo kung magkaibigan talaga kami. I was friends with Laurie, at least. He should have acknowledged that!

"It's just a kiss, Estrella. Why are you making a big deal out of it?"

"Because it's a big deal!"

"Why? Do you like Night?"

Napaawang ang labi ko dahil sa narinig ko. Why did people keep on insinuating that I have feelings for Night?! Hindi ba pwede na kaibigan ko iyong ex niya kaya hindi ako natuwa sa ginawa niya? Hindi ba pwede na nirerespeto ko ang alaala ni Laurie kaya ayoko sa ginawa niya? Why did I automatically have to have feelings for Night for me to feel this way?

"No," I replied more calmly. "I don't have feelings for Night," I said in a more elaborate manner so that he'd understand.

"Then why are you so affected?"

"Nothing. Just forget I said it," sabi ko sa kanya. "But what do you know about Night?" I asked him again. I already asked someone to do another thorough background check about Night. I already saw Night's file from Sandra but I wanted to make sure. Sigurado ako na mas marami pa akong dapat malaman kay Night and I knew it would be hard to blow his covers. Even the way he communicate with people was insane. He's crazily meticulous. Ang hirap niyang hulihin.

"Not much."

"His connection with the *Ostenhaimers*?" I asked. That was the most important thing I had to know. I had to know it. It had to be at least a step ahead of Night. I shouldn't let him control everything. I should at least have a leverage I could use against him. He's too unpredictable. One

day, he's this. Another, he's that.

I should always be sure. I ṣhould always protect myself.

"Ask him," he said.

"I'm asking you."

"I honestly don't want to get caught in the middle of this."

I arched a brow. "Then maybe you should have thought of that before you made me kill your parents," I threateningly said to him.

"Just ask him, Belinda," he said.

"Do you know someone called Valderrama?" I asked.

"You mean Claire?"

"Claire? Who's this Claire?"

"She's a *Troisiéme*," Lorenzo mentioned.

"And why is Night associating himself with a *Troisiéme*?" I asked. I knew Night was a fan of sleeping around but I thought he'd just go down as far as screwing a *Deuxiéme*. Hindi ko alam na kaya niyang mas bumaba pa roon.

"You should see Claire for yourself so that you'd know," he said and then ended the call all too quick. What an ass!

For another hour, I beat myself to it. Ilang beses akong nag-isip ng paraan kung paano ko malalaman ang mga sikreto ni Night. I knew having him investigated could only take me so far. If Laurie were still alive, I knew she'd be able to help me... or maybe not. Her loyalty to Night never wavered until her dying seconds. I doubted if she'd help me.

I tried to go over Sandra's files again but I couldn't find what I was looking for. I knew I was looking for something but I couldn't specifically find it. This was driving me insane!

Mas lalo lang sumasakit ang ulo ko sa mga gusto kong malaman. If only manipulating Night was easy... if only he wasn't a master manipulator himself.

The next day came and I was again, face to face with Night. I ignored his pale face
and red lips.

"Where are we headed?" I asked.

"Valderrama," he answered.

"You mean Claire?"

Tumaas ang kilay niya. "Did you investigate?"

I raised my brow, too. "Of course. This is my business after all, Night. I just want to be sure that you won't mess this up for me."

He nodded and a small smile was playing on his face. "If I didn't know better, I'd think that you're jealous, Belinda."

"Stop dreaming, Night. I'm someone who you'll never have," I said and then walked pass him. Mabilis akong pumasok sa sasakyan at umupo sa dulo. I had never been thankful for the division between our seats until today. Being in the same car with him was making me nauseous at best. His presence alone was suffocating.

On our way to the destination, Night's fingers were gently tapping against the seat rest. I was distracted with his long fingers. I kept on staring outside but my eyes betrayed me every fucking time. Why was I only noticing Night? I had known him for months but I never gave him a second glance. I had always known him as a manwhore. I had always tagged him as Laurie's guy.

Why was I only noticing everything about him?

"Like what you're seeing?" he suddenly said. Bumaling siya sa akin. He smiled, for fuck's sake!

"Get off your high horse, Night."

He shrugged. "I'm not the one who's staring, Boe. It's you who keep on checking me out," he said and then wiggled his eyebrows.

"I wasn't checking you out. I was just thinking what an asshole you are."

"I may be an asshole, but I'm a damn fine asshole," he replied. God! I tried so hard not to scowl at him. He shouldn't know how triggering he

was! He knew which buttons to push and he's pushing them all at once!

Pakiramdam ko ay magkakaroon na ako ng stiff-neck dahil sa iisang direksyon lang ako naka-tingin hanggang sa makarating kami sa pupuntahan namin. I didn't even dare check where we were headed. I just knew we're safe. I had all my men with me. And I had my gun with me. Papasabugin ko ang ulo ng kung sino man na magtangkang patayin ako. No one would kill me until I was done with the *Ostenhaimers*. Only then I could rest my case.

When we reached the destination, I checked the gun strapped in my side.

"You won't need that," Night said.

"You might trust your tramp but I don't know her," I replied.

He chuckled. "Claire's not my tramp."

"Oh. Do you prefer I call her your slut?"

"You can call her slut, just not my slut," he said. "Haven't slept with anyone in a while, Boe. It's making me a bit cranky already."

"Then go get laid," I snarked.

He eyed me and laughed. "Oh, I will, Belinda. I will."

Chapitre Trente Huit

It was, apparently, true that a woman's instinct is to be trusted. Something about that Claire Valderrama wasn't quite adding up. I didn't know what Night was thinking when he proposed that we should change our ammunition supplier. The last one was working well… despite the few money embezzled. But we already worked on that. A few threats really go a long way. Kaya naman hindi ko maintindihan kung bakit sinabi ni Night na dito sa Claire Valderrama na lang kami makipag-usap.

"If she does anything I don't like, you'll be at the receiving end of my disappointment," I whispered to him.

He held my elbow. "Am I not always, Boe?" he asked. "I'm always the one to receive whatever the hell you're feeling."

"Because you're infuriating!" I hissed and he just chuckled. May sasabihin pa sana siya nung marinig namin na magsalita iyong babae sa harap namin.

"Nightly," the woman in front of us said. I raised my chin. I shouldn't look intimidated. She's way below me. She's beneath me. Bakit ako kakabahan sa kanya? And besides, she's just one of the many that Night fucked. Nothing special.

"Claire," Night said. "Long time no see."

"Yeah... It's been a while," Claire said. "Hi, Miss Estrella," she said, looking at me. Tumaas ang kilay ko. Why was she calling me Miss Estrella habang kay Night naman ay pangalan lang? Were they that close? That no formality was needed anymore? After all, this Claire was way below in terms of rank. She should've known were to put herself. 'Wag niyang hayaan na ako pa ang maglagay sa kanya sa dapat niyang kalagyan.

"Let's get down to business," I said.

Naglakad kami papunta sa arsenal nila. She began to introduce the new advancements and I couldn't help but be impressed. She was quite good. Maybe even better than the old partner. I kept quiet as she continued her presentation.

"Told you she's good," Night said in my ear. He was standing beside me and I wasn't sure if him touching my arm was done by purpose. All I knew was that I was too aware of how close he was.

"Didn't know in what aspect she's good at," I snarked.

He chuckled again. He's really finding everything funny these days. "I don't know what I'm going to do with you, Boe," he said, slightly shaking his head.

An hour passed before the presentation was done. I kept on nodding as Claire explained everything. I just asked a few questions and clarified a few things. Si Night naman, siya ang nagtanong nang ibang mga bagay na hindi ko naisip na itanong. He was very meticulous with everything and I couldn't help but be impressed. He was really raised for this job.

"It's good," I said. I give credit when credit is due. Just because she's one of Night's women didn't mean that I wouldn't give her a chance. Her personal life was none of my business... so long as that business wouldn't affect my business.

Halata ang saya sa mukha niya nung makuha niya ang approval ko. I learned that in order to make people crave for your approval is to be stingy with it. I don't just give my yes to anyone. Whoever wants it should work for it. That's how I learned to do it. Because if you give anything

away easily, the sparkle fades. You become just one of those.

"That's good to hear, Miss Estrella," she said.

"You can talk to Night about the rest," I said and then didn't even bother to look at her face. I didn't want to overanalyze her expression. If she's still interested in Night, then that's really none of my business. Because if Night wasn't even keen on giving Laurie a breathing space after her death, then why was I even overworking myself? If Night didn't even want to protect Laurie's memories, then why was I the one making a big deal out of it?

Let them do what they want to do. Malaki na sila.

I stayed inside the car as they talked. I busied myself while waiting. Nagpabili rin ako ng dyaryo and had them scanned. I didn't want Night to see me reading the newspapers because he'd have an idea about how I was painfully studying everything about him. Mabuti na rin siguro kung magiging busy siya kasama iyong Claire Valderrama na iyon.

A new phone was bought. Of course, I didn't want to use my real number. Kapag ginawa ko iyon, alam ko na pagtatawanan ako ni Night at itatanong sa akin kung nag-iisip ba talaga ako. Same as Lorenzo. They kept on nitpicking everything I do.

After encircling the numbers like Night did, I dialed the numbers. I waited for a few rings hanggang may sumagot.

"Hello, Dirty Burger! What's your order" Agad na kumunot ang noo ko. What the hell? Bakit nasa London ako napunta? Base sa accent ng kausap ko, alam ko na sa London iyon. I didn't know how to respond. How did Night even do this? Was there a secret code or something? But I had no idea about his codes! God! Paano niya ba ginagawa iyon?!

I dropped the call since I didn't know any better. At kung iyon nga ang contact ni Night, I didn't want that person to suspect. Masisira ang ginagawa kong pag-iimbestiga kay Night kung malalaman niya rin lang ang mga gusto kong gawin.

"It's a done deal," Night said as he slid next to me. "What's your problem again?" he asked.

"Nothing," I replied.

"Your forehead's creased again."

"It's a normal sighting, Night. You really better get used to it."

He shrugged. "Can't. You weren't like that when I first met you."

I turned and looked at him. "Well, I came so far. I was innocent when I first met you and you *Dieux* corrupted me," sabi ko sa kanya. They all made me things I never thought I would do. They made me kill, they made me murder people. They took my heart and left a hollow space inside my chest. So, what right did they have to ask me why I turned out this way?

"That's not how I remember it, Boe. I remember you asking me to let you chop up your friend."

Memories began to flood my mind when he said that. The pictures that I tried so hard to bury at the back of my mind began to resurface. I didn't want to remember that night… I didn't want to remember how I cut Cathy into pieces. I didn't want to remember the power that I felt as I took her life away. I didn't want to feel that kind of feeling again.

It's addicting. It's empowering.

I didn't want to get lost in that kind of madness again.

"Don't you remember it?" he asked. I pursed my lips. The side of his lips rose. "You're being coy now. It's not fun."

"Just shut it, Night," I hissed.

"Why? Do you regret killing Ella?"

"I don't regret killing her. If she's still alive, I'll gladly cut her to pieces and then feed her to Avo," I said and then Night laughed.

"You really hate Avo, huh."

I glared at him. "Why won't I hate him? He killed my parents! He killed Oli!" I shouted. My chest was heaving and I could feel the familiar feeling of anger rising from my chest. "Isn't this the reason why you helped me before? Because you knew about what he did?"

He kept silent. Up until now, he still hadn't made himself clear of his intentions. I didn't know what he was playing for… why he was

playing... and what his end game was. He just played and played with no aim. And it was clouding my judgment of him. I didn't know which team he was playing for. Because if this indeed was a game, there were at least two teams.

And he should play for my team.

"I won't stop until he's dead."

I thought we were headed home. We were done for the day. Unlike weeks before, I used to spend my entire day going around to check if everything's going accordingly. But with Night's help, the organization was organized more than ever—or since I began to manage it. I didn't exactly know how my parents did it. They never let me near them. I was shipped to Japan and stayed there for as long as I could remember. Memories with my parents were blur. Oli's the only one who had the gall to visit me... the crazy one.

"What are we doing here?" I asked Night as we stopped in front of what looked like a warehouse.

"I secured the place for us," sabi niya at saka nagsimulang maglakad.

"What is this place?"

"Paintball."

"What?"

He stopped and then looked at me. He was smiling—not smirk. "We're going to play."

"I don't have time to play, Night," I told him. Akma akong aalis nang hawakan niya ang kamay ko. I tried to yank his hand off from me but he was much stronger than me. I looked at him with gritted teeth. "What can't you understand, Night? I'm far from the Boe you knew. I don't play games anymore."

I didn't have that luxury. If I stop moving, everything would crumble down. If I make a mistake, someone is already waiting for my downfall.

It was hard to live everyday trying to surpass everyone's expectations. Even breathing itself was hard enough for me.

"I know," he said.

"Then why don't you try to understand me?"

And when he looked at me with those eyes, I couldn't help but get drowned. Again.

"Because that's not you. You're just angry, Belinda. You're blinded with rage."

"And you're not?" I scoffed. "Aren't you angry at me for what I did to Laurie?"

His jaw clenched. This was the first time that I mentioned Laurie to him. It was a forbidden topic that we kept on prancing around. I refused to talk about her to him because I was after that the wound of her death was still fresh. If he was mourning, I wanted to respect it. I wanted to give him time... but with the way he was acting? I didn't know if he was mourning. Or if he ever really mourned. Why could he go so fast from Laurie to Claire?

Just when I thought he was capable of love...

"I don't want to talk about it," he replied in a low tone.

"Then stop forcing me to ignore what I am feeling. I don't care if I get miserable with rage. Hindi ako titigil hanggang hindi sila nagbabayad sa nangyari sa pamilya ko, Night."

"Is that what you really want?"

I clenched my jaw and nodded. This was what I wanted. I wanted Avo's blood on my hands. I wanted their last breath taken by me. I wanted to look at their eyes as life gets taken away.

It was just revenge I was living for.

"I'll get it for you," he said. "I promise to give you Avo if that means you can go back to being who you are."

My lips parted. Why did he have such hopes that I could come back to whoever I was? I already crossed the line. I crossed the line even when I knew there was no turning back. I killed knowing that my conscience

would never let me hear the end of it. I murdered knowing that those people would be missed by someone.

I basked in every death taken.

There was no fucking turning back.

"Who I was was someone with a loose screw in the head. Get it together, Night. I was never normal in the first place," sinabi ko at saka ko siya nilagpasan.

I was tired of people hoping there was a best in me... because there was none. This was me. There was no changing it anymore.

Hindi ko alam kung nasaan kami pero hindi ako natakot na maglakad. My people were watching me. And they should. I made sure of it that if ever I die, everything would disappear. No one had the right to take over my family's business except for me. Pinaghirapan ito ng mga magulang ako. Walang pwedeng kumuha.

And if I were to die, I'd make sure to take everyone with me.

Nang makapasok ako, nakita ko ang ilan sa mga tauhan ko. And before I could even ask them what they were doing, naramdaman ko ang braso ni Night sa balikat ko.

"Ready to play?" he whispered.

"I told you, no playing!"

"Boe, you only know how to shoot a steady target. Can you even shoot a moving target?"

"And why do I need to know how to do that? That's why I have people working for me!" I hissed. "And do you want me to shoot my people?" I asked and then I saw their faces pale. Good. Because I would, if they'd push me. It's so easy to take someone's life if that someone didn't mean a shit to me.

"Because we don't know what will happen," he said. "When Avo gets here, shit will start to get real, Boe. I just want to prepare you, that's all."

I looked at him and I saw that he was sincere. He was right. The moment I take Avo with me, I knew that his parents would stop at nothing to get back at me. The real war would finally be waged. Because

Avo's the heir. They would do everything to protect him… the same way I would do everything to kill him.

We were just playing the game. And Avo was the trophy.

"Alright," I breathed. "Let's play."

I looked at the members and they were all still pale. I just had this aura.

"So, we'll be divided into two teams. I will lead the first one and Boe will be the leader of the other."

"It's not fair! You're good at shooting."

He winked at me. "Don't you know that?" he said and he made me gag. Why did he make everything dirty? "As I was saying, the last man standing will be the victor," he said. "Are you all ready?"

My people slowly nodded… without any hint of excitement in their faces.

"Boe, don't scare them," Night said.

"I'm not doing anything."

"You're scowling," he said.

"I'm not. This is my normal face."

Napailing si Night. "Anyway, you're all free to shoot Boe. In this game, she's not your boss. Right, Boe?" Night asked and then nudged me.

I sighed. "Yeah…" I dragged.

Dinala na sa amin iyong mga kailangang gamitin. They taught me how to fire the paintball gun and everything I needed to know. It seemed fun but I didn't want to show that I was enjoying this. I had to maintain the tough front so that my people would fear me. I didn't care if they hated me, so long as they fear me.

"It's dark in here," I told Night. I could barely see anything.

He was strapping me with the guns and adjusting things. Pero kahit sa dilim, kitang-kita ko pa rin kung gaano ka-pula ang labi niya. Why was this guy's lips so red? And why was he so pale?

"It's safer here. We can't play outside. It's too risky for you," he said.

"It's risky for you, too. You're an heir."

"Yeah... but I don't have to take revenge on anyone. I can die in peace. Unlike you."

I pursed my lips. He was right. I couldn't just die knowing that Avo's still alive and breathing. That would make me restless until my dying moment. I needed to know that he paid all his debts before I could rest in peace.

He kneeled in front of me and began strapping a real gun on my legs. "If anything goes wrong, there's a gun. Protect yourself."

"I thought you'd protect me?"

He smiled. "At all cost. But for now, we're enemies," he said and then showed me his gun.

We played for an hour and I couldn't hide the enjoyment in my face. I had fun. It was fun! Kahit na natalo kami sa huli, masaya pa rin ako. And I believed that my people were creeped out by my smile. They must be thinking that I was going crazy because I was smiling. I couldn't even remember the last time I smiled. It had been so long already.

"You had fun?"

I nodded. "Though I feel sore," I said as I stretched my muscles. Tinamaan ako sa likod kanina. I felt that it would bruise. Night stood behind me and began massaging my shoulders. "Do you even know what you're doing?" I asked him as I had my eyes closed and tried to enjoy what he was doing.

"No. Have no idea," he said as he continued.

"You suck."

"Sure, but you look like you're enjoying."

"I have no choice," I answered as I tried hard not to moan. This felt too relaxing. Maybe too relaxing. I could feel my eyelids getting heavy as he massaged my sore muscles.

He continued what he was doing until I felt myself get lulled to sleep.

"Sleep well, Boe. Sleep until you can," he whispered in my ears.

Chapitre Trente Neuf

"This was taken yesterday," Night said as he placed an envelope in front of me. I instinctively reached for it and opened to see the content. Avo. Pictures of Avo were there. He was snapped in different occasions but the fact remained that he was well. It was only a picture but I could tell that he was living well. He's indeed a demon. Paano niya nagagawang mabuhay ng normal gayong alam niya na hawak ko ang kapatid niya? For all he knew, Ayo's already dead.

And I hated myself more for falling for his trap once. I was a fucking idiot for believing that he care. He wasn't dubbed as the deadliest man in the school for nothing.

Never again.

"Why don't you just capture him and then bring him to me?" I asked. He was walking freely. He was walking without a care in the world. Mas lalo lang nagsisikip sa galit ang puso ko dahil sa ginagawa niya. Couldn't he at least show some remorse? Or to at least show that he was worried that his brother was abducted?

Mayroong kinuhang litrato si Night at pinakita sa akin. "You see these guys?" he said and then pointed at three different guys. "They are highly-trained assassins and they're protecting Avo. We can't just blindly go to Avo and get him. That's stupid."

I clenched my jaw. I really should've killed Avo when I had the chance. I should've ended his life when I could still have him close to me. I was close… so fucking close… but I let my body cloud my judgment.

I slept with the man responsible for killing my family.

Upon remembering it, agad akong tumayo. Iniisip ko pa lang na nahawakan ako ni Avo, pakiramdam ko ay napaka-dumi kong babae. I let that animal touch me. I let him invade my most private parts. I let him so fucking close.

"Where are you going?" Night asked.

"To clean myself."

"Why?" he asked as he looked at me. My hair was still wet from the earlier bath I took. But I felt dirty all over. I shouldn't have thought about Avo in the first place. All he brought to me were pain and anger. Hindi ako makapaniwala na minsan sa buhay ko, inisip ko na mahal niya ako. Because he wasn't even capable of love. He just used me. He used me to get what he wanted. He used me to get Ayo.

He fucking crushed my heart. He fucking took my soul.

He took everything for me. Wala ng natira.

"You made me do it," I said, my voice barely audible. "You made me sleep with him."

Pain shot across his eyes. I didn't want to acknowledge it. I wanted someone to blame. And wanted to blame him for whatever I was feeling. For this disgust that was living inside me. I wanted to remember that it was him who made me do it. Because maybe that way, the pain would go away…

"You knew that he was just playing me but you still pushed me," I said, lips quivering. "I don't even know why I'm letting you near me, Night. I don't know why you're even here when I know that the moment you can, you'll betray me."

When he took a step closer, I held my breathe. I didn't want to be near him. His presence would suffocate me and I was already feeling more than I could handle. I didn't want to deal with feelings anymore.

They just weigh me down. They just pull me down.

Tama naman si Night. Feelings were bullshit.

Tama si Lorenzo. Emotions would end you.

It's better to feel nothing. It's better to be empty. Because this way, you'd lose nothing. Because this way, there's nothing worthy to be protected.

"Belinda..." he called my name. I looked down because I didn't want to be captivated by his eyes. His stares would weigh me down. His stares would ease this heavy feeling inside me. I didn't want that. I needed this feeling. I needed this. I would not stop until I was done.

But when I didn't heed, he held my chin and made me look at him. I tried to pry my eyes away from him but he leaned in until I could not avoid him anymore.

His nose was touching mine. The proximity was too much.

"I'm sorry if you feel that way," he whispered. I could feel his breathe against my skin. He really was too close. "I'm sorry that you feel that way... but it was needed."

I pursed my lips but I wanted to ask him. "Why?" I croaked. I finally looked at him. I could feel my eyes watering. I hated Avo for killing my brother. I hated him for the death of my parents. But I hated him the most for playing with my feelings. I was innocent. I had nothing to do with Ayo's disappearance. If he had only talked to me, I would have helped him... Kasi minsan, inisip ko na mahal ko siya. Because once in my life, I thought I would do anything for him.

But he crushed my heart in return.

He made me lose hope.

He killed me.

"You're the only one who can break him," he whispered. His hand touched my cheek. His thumb wiped the tear that left my eye.

"I can't break him, Night. He doesn't love me. He didn't love me."

Akala ko wala na akong puso. Akala ko sinira na niya. Akala ko kinuha niya na. Pero bakit hanggang ngayon, may sakit pa rin akong

nararamdaman? Why was I feeling something for the person who did nothing but hurt me? Why was I even feeling anything for him?

If I could, I would delete Avo from my life. Sinaktan niya ako. Pinaasa niya ako. Niloko niya ako. He made me pay for something I never did. He made me play a game that I didn't even want to play.

He blinded me. And then played with me.

"Do you love him?"

I shook my head. "I don't love him."

"Then why are you hurting?" he asked.

"I'm not hurt, Night. I'm mad. I'm fucking mad at him for everything he did. I'm mad at him for everything he took. Hindi ako matatahimik hanggang hindi siya nagbabayad. I won't stop. Never."

Night nodded as I talked. His thumb was under my eyes, wiping the tears that dared escape. I was shaking in anger. My chest felt like exploding. I couldn't wait until I see Avo again. I wanted to end him. I wanted to end what I was feeling. Sobrang bigat. Sobrang bigat ng galit na dinadala ko para sa kanya. And I couldn't let go of the pain. I kept on nursing it until it got worst.

I wanted all my rage on him. Gusto ko na kapag natapos ako sa kanya, wala ng natitira. I wanted to take everything from him. Like what he did to me.

"I'm sorry," Night kept on whispering. I wanted to stop but my eyes betrayed me.

For the first time in months, I cried again.

I didn't know how I managed to sleep that day. All I could remember was Night staying by my side, caressing my hair until sleep visited me. And for the first time in weeks, I was again able to get a good night sleep. And I refused to acknowledge that it was because of Night. I didn't want attachments to anyone.

Feelings would only hurt me. And I had been hurt enough.

"Hi Boe," a husky voice greeted me. I slowly peeled my eyes open. Agad na nakita ko si Night sa tabi ko. He was holding a tray full of food. "Dinner in bed?"

"H-ha? Bakit?" I asked, still disoriented. My eyes were still adjusting from the light. I sat down on the bed at saka naman inilapag ni Night sa harap ko iyong tray.

I glanced at the bed side table and checked for the time. 8PM. The day's almost over.

"Nothing."

"Why are you doing this?" I sincerely asked him.

"You deserve a break, Boe. You don't have to be vengeful all the time. Sometimes... breathe."

I looked at him. He was smiling at me. I tried not to read too much into his actions. He's Night. I didn't expect anything from him. And I would never expect anything from him. Kung si Laurie ay nagawa niyang saktan, sino ako para ingatan niya?

And he had been nothing but a liar from the start. He had always told me that. He had been upfront that he was not one to be trusted. So why would I even entrust myself to him? Hindi pa ako nababaliw.

I let him serve me. I didn't know his ulterior motives but I didn't care. I was just closely guarding myself from him. He's so near. He could hurt me easily if I'd let him. But I wouldn't. I was still licking the wounds Avo left for me. I couldn't handle another.

That would be too much. Naaawa ako sa sarili ko.

"I already finished all your works for the rest of the day," he said as he put strips of bacon on my plate. "You're free."

"Okay," I replied as I reached for the glass of milk. Masyado namang pambata itong hinanda na pagkain ni Night sa akin.

The bacon was slightly burned but it was still edible. The pancake was not yet fully cooked but it was alright. Iyong gatas lang ang pinakamaayos

dahil galing naman iyon sa karton. But as I was about to take another mouthful, I noticed that Night's finger was slightly swelling.

"What happened?" I asked him. Akma kong hahawakan iyong daliri niya pero mabilis niyang inilayo sa akin.

"Nothing," he replied.

"That doesn't look like nothing," I said, arching a brow. "What happened?"

Night sighed. "Well… I tried to cook."

My lips parted. Nagluto siya? "Why?" I asked, confused. Night didn't cook. In *AdM*, we had a cook visiting us regularly kaya hindi namin kailangan na magluto. There were restaurants everywhere in case we didn't fancy what was prepared. And in our houses, I was sure there were plenty of people to serve us. So I was dead sure that Night never tried cooking before. Because he didn't need to.

I, myself, never held a knife in my life… except for the time when I had to deal with Ella and Cathy. God. Until now, I could still feel the excitement crawling through my veins.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because I want to."

"You don't have to."

"But I want to," he shot back.

I pursed my lips and gritted my teeth. I didn't like what he was doing. I didn't like how he was disarming me with his words. I didn't like that he was even trying.

"Stop this."

He looked at me. "Stop what?" he asked.

"This," I hissed. "Stop being nice. Stop acting nice."

"Why?"

My lips were slightly quivering. I refused to name what I was feeling. What I knew was that I didn't like it. Avo was like this before. He tried to act like he cared. He tried to make me feel like I was something. He lifted me up only to let me down. He made me whole only to crush me.

He made me feel loved only to leave me hating myself.

Because that's who Avo was. He destroys everything. He destroys everyone.

"Because I don't want this! I don't want you to be nice to me! Just go back to how you treat me before!" I shouted and then threw the tray across the wall. Agad akong tumayo at nagsimulang maglakad palabas pero hinawakan ni Night ang braso ko. He pulled me back. He pulled me close. "Bitiwan mo ako!"

I struggled but he held me steady. Gusto kong umalis. Gusto kong lumayo sa kanya pero hindi ko magawa.

"Let me go!" I shouted.

"Why are you doing this to yourself?" he asked.

"Because I don't want feelings! I don't want it anymore!" I shouted again.

"Why? Do you have feelings for me? Is it why you're avoiding me?"

"I don't have feelings for you, Night!"

"Then why are you acting this way, Boe? Why are you acting like my touches burn you? Like my kiss was poison?" he breathed. "Why?"

I stared at his eyes. I wanted him to feel where I was coming from. I wanted him to see the fear in my eyes. I wanted him to know why I didn't want this. I wanted him to know why I couldn't risk it again.

"I don't want to feel."

He pulled me closer.

"Feelings are part of life, Boe. There's no escaping it," he whispered.

"You're wrong. I can escape it. Just like how you escaped it," I said. "You said you don't have feelings. Because feelings mess people up. And you're probably right, Night. Because I'm messed up. I'm a fucking mess even if I refuse to acknowledge it."

Tears began to fall. One by one. Until I couldn't count them anymore. My chest felt heavy with rage. With anger. With pain. With regret. With betrayal. I just wanted to let them all out. I wanted to be free. But I couldn't. And I shouldn't.

"It hurt when Avo betrayed me. I trusted him with my heart. I trusted him with myself... kasi akala ko mahal niya ako... kasi akala ko, kahit ganito ako, pwede rin pala akong mahalin. Pero ano ang ginawa niya? Pina-mukha niya sa akin na wala akong karapatang mahalin. Because I'm fucking dysfunctional! Because I don't deserve to be loved! Because I'm only to be played with!"

I shouted my pain. I shouted my anger. I let everything out.

"I trusted him, Night! I trusted him and he betrayed me! Everyone betrayed me! Avo, Cathy, Laurie, and even Sandra! They all betrayed me! Masisisi mo ba ako kung ayaw ko ng magtiwala? Masisisi mo ba ako kung natatakot ako sa lahat ng tao na mabait sa akin? Kasi alam ko na lolokohin din nila ako. Na sasaktan din nila ako. Na aalis din sila dahil sino ba ako? Palagi naman akong iniiwan at sinasaktan."

I was heaving in anger. My face was drowning in tears. But I didn't stop. I couldn't stop.

"I don't want feelings anymore, Night. I'm tired... I'm really tired..."

Night pulled me close and enclosed me in his arms. He didn't say a word. He just kept me close. Tears fell down. Breathing ragged. Chest heaving.

"I'm sorry," he kept on whispering. "I'm sorry..."

"Sanay akong masaktan."

Night broke the hug and cupped my face. Those intense eyes boring into mine.

"No one can hurt you now," he said. "No one will."

"I know. Because I'll never let anyone hurt me again."

He shook his head. "Because I will never let anyone hurt you again, Boe. You'll never fear again for your heart. I swear my life on that," he said as he leaned in and kissed me on the lips.

"Night, what—"

But instead of answering, he leaned in and kissed me again. And as soon as our lips met, I forgot about this was wrong. About how this shouldn't happen. About Laurie. About my feelings. All of those were

suddenly forgotten. All I cared about was him kissing me and how much I wanted this.

God, this was so wrong.

I answered every kiss with equal intensity. I opened my mouth and let him kiss the shit out of me. Damn being wrong. I answered every stroke of tongue, every movement of his lips… I was drowning… So fucking bad and I didn't even needed saving. Hell, I didn't want saving.

I was drowning.

And when our lips parted, something felt missing.

"I will protect you," he said, his forehead leaning against mine.

I shook my head and reached for his lips. I kissed him. "No promises."

We kissed. And kissed. And kissed until our lips felt numb. Clothes were thrown at the floor… at the bed… I didn't know anymore. All I could think of was how his hands felt good against my skin, how his lips felt good against mine. How he felt so good against me.

This was so wrong. But he was so good.

Wrapping my legs around his waist, I trailed kisses down his neck. "This is wrong," I repeatedly said. "Laurie will hate me."

"I know," he replied, pulling my panties down and caressing my clit. "But I can't anymore, Belinda."

I grinded against his hand, feeling the friction against my aching core. *'I'm sorry, Laurie,'* I kept on chanting inside my head. Hindi ko na mapigilan. Every flick of his tongue against mine was enough to send me to the edge. I didn't know he was this good.

"Oh shit," I said when he inserted two fingers and started pumping. "God!" I hysterically said as his fingers began to do their magic. I closed my eyes and let myself get lost in the sensation. Pumping his fingers in and out… oh shit… and when he brushed his thumb against my clit, I was a fucking goner.

"Don't call God, Belinda. Call my name," he said, making me lose my shit.

"Night…" I moaned. He circled his thumb and pumped harder.

"Yes, Belinda…" he whispered against my ear. "Come for me…"

My head was swirling. I was on the edge… and when he flicked his thumb… shit.

I was still drowning with the sensation when he began walking. I felt the mattress on my back. Night was standing before me, his eyes dark with lust. It was mirroring mine. It had been too long… too fucking long.

"Don't do it slow, Night… I want you to fuck me," I said as he pulled my panties down. I didn't want to make love with him. I just wanted sex. No feelings. Just fucking. I wanted to make it clear.

And not one second later, he flipped me over and made me kneel. I groaned when I felt him inside me. He pumped in and out of me—each time was rougher than the last. He didn't even let me breathe. God!

"Nightly! Shit!" I repeated again and again. I was lost in the sensation and I didn't want to be found. All I cared about was his thumb gently caressing my clit as he rammed inside my core. I bucked my hips against him, trying to match his rhythm. Every groan coming out of his mouth felt like a delicious invitation. I kept on grinding while he was pounding hard, both of us rushing to catch the orgasm. My mind was blank.

And when I came again, he groaned when my core clenched around him. He buried his head against my shoulder and bit me. "Fuck," he moaned.

My chest was heaving. I came twice tonight already and Night still hadn't. It was true. I couldn't feel my legs anymore. The rumors about him were fucking true.

"Tired?" I asked him when he lie down on top of me. I could feel his heavy breathing.

"No fucking way," he moaned and then closed his eyes. "I never get tired of fucking, Belinda."

Chapitre Quarante

I stirred in my sleep because of a tickling sensation. I tried to remove the hands away but it always came back. I pulled the sheets closer to my body but I felt it being pulled away from me. I groaned when I opened my eyes and saw Night eyeing me.

"Good morning," he said in his bedroom voice.

"What time is it?" I said, groaning. My eyes felt heavy and I was still too sleepy.

"It's already noon," he said, going near me. His hair was tousled but his lips were enough to distract me. Why were they so red already? I was fucking tempted to pull him close and have a bite of those lips. They were begging me to kiss them. God, what was I thinking? I clearly couldn't think properly with Night looking like he just fucked all night in front of me.

"What?!" I shouted and sat down. The sheets fell down and my body was not covered in the slightest. But I didn't even care about that. What was to hide? Night saw everything already. Touched everything. Tasted everything. There's nothing to hide from him anymore.

"Why didn't you wake me up?! I have work!" But instead of helping me like what he should've, he just pushed me back to the bed. God, he's impossible sometimes! "Night, ano ba!" I roared. I knew we fucked all

night but it's noon already! I should've been working and not slacking off!

"Geez, calm down, Belindà," he said, pining me down. I tried to fight him but he was too strong. "I already finished the workload for today. You can read them if you want. And for your peace of mind, I asked Angela to watch over me as I did my work," paliwanag niya. Mas naka-hinga ako nang maluwag nang malaman ko na nagawa niya na pala ang mga trabaho ko.

"Now, what do you want to eat?" he asked in a more gentle manner.

"I'll read the files first," I said and then pulled the duvet closer to me. The blow of the aircon was so cold against my nakedness. And I didn't like how Night was looking at me.

"Why don't you eat first?"

I stood up and then wrapped the sheet around my body. "Night, it's already bad enough that I'm letting you run my business. I don't want to be totally unaware of everything," sabi ko sa kanya at saka dumiretso para maligo. I made sure that the door was locked. I didn't want to take my chance. I didn't want Night to follow me here.

As I stood under the shower head, my head kept on repeating everything that happened last night. Every single thing. God! I could clearly remember how he touched me, how he kissed me, how he fucked me into submission. I wanted to hate myself for liking everything he did with me.

I was still alive but my soul was clearly already burning in hell. I killed Laurie and then fucked her boyfriend.

Hindi ko alam kung gaano ako katagal na naliligo. I just wanted to get away from Night. This was the only place of solace I had for myself. Everywhere, he's there. He's making it hard to breathe. He's making it hard to live.

I didn't want feelings. Certainly not with him. Because he's death waiting to happen. Alam ko na kapag nagkaroon ako ng nararamdaman para sa kanya, para ko na ring pinatay ang sarili ko. Because he would

hurt me. He would hurt me in the most painful way possible. Because that's who he was. Despite every promises he made, despite every good deed he showed, deep inside, he's still Nightly.

He's dangerous. And just like everyone else, I shouldn't trust him.

An hour passed before I went out. My skin felt wrinkly from the overexposure with the water but that was the least of my priorities. I wore my bathrobe and was on my way to my walk-in closet when I saw Night sitting on the edge of my bed.

"Why are you still here?" I asked.

"Waiting for you."

"Why?"

Tumayo siya at nagsimulang maglakad palapit sa akin. And with every step he took, I took a step back. Umatras ako nang umatras hanggang sa maramdaman ko ang lamig ng pader sa likod ko. I looked up and I saw a glint of mischief in his eyes. He was loving this. He was loving every reaction I was giving him and I couldn't do anything about it. Everything about him disarmed me.

He raised his hands and held me by my waist. I was wearing a robe but I felt his warm hands—the very same hands who brought me to the edge last night.

"You're trapped," he whispered, his hands massaging my waist.

"What do you want, Night?" I asked, looking at him.

"You, again, if possible." I tried to push him away but he wouldn't even budge. He was much stronger than me… o baka naman hindi ko lang gustong lumaban. "You, again, if you're not so sore."

My face immediately reddened upon hearing what he just said. He was crass with his words. Last night, he kept on whispering dirty things to my ear. I wanted to make him stop, but I also didn't want to. Hearing him say those words made me so fucking weak… and I ended up begging him to take me over and over again. And by the time we ended, I couldn't feel my legs anymore.

Para akong nalumpo.

Fucking hell. This must be what they were saying... about fucking Night. And it was all true. I couldn't fucking feel my legs anymore. It was as if they betrayed me in ways unimaginable.

"Aren't you being coy now, Belinda?" he said, tucking a stray strands of my hair behind my ear. "After begging me endlessly to fuck you last night, you're going to ignore me now?"

I pursed my lips as I subconsciously convinced myself that this guy wasn't going to do my any good. He was going to do me good—so fucking good—but he wasn't going to be of any good to me.

"That was nothing," I said. And I wasn't convincing even myself.

"Sure," he said, caressing my cheek. His hand went inside my robe and his thumb began fondling my skin... just below my breast... just fucking enough to make me breathless. He was a fucking tease. "Sure, it's nothing," he continued as his thumb began to move upward... slowly... and it was torture how I waited for his hands to touch my breast.

"I hate you," I whispered, my breathing ragged from the anticipation of his touch.

"Sure, Belinda, sure." His fingers touched my peak and then pinched it gently. My lips parted at the sensation. I saw him smirking as he looked at me, helpless with his touch. Writhing in anticipation.

My lips parted, my breathing uneven.

His other hand went to untie my robe. He parted it until I was completely naked before him.

"Do you want me to touch you?" he asked and I could only nodded. "Where, Belinda? Tell me."

I looked at him and his eyes looked drunk. I was drunk from his touch. I was drunk from him. And I knew this was wrong but it felt so good. I didn't want him to stop. I never wanted him to stop.

I reached for his hand and then guided it to where I wanted him to touch me. My lips parted even more at the contact. God, this was so wrong but this was also so good!

His thumb began to flicker against my clit and I knew I was a fucking

goner. My hands were on his shoulders, looking for support. My knees were buckling against the flick of his thumb. My head was resting against his shoulder. My eyes were closed. My lower lip was bleeding from biting it. I didn't know what to do with him anymore.

"I don't want your love, Boe. That's the last thing I want," he whispered against my ear. "I just want to make you happy. You deserve it, at least," he said and then I felt his fingers inside me. One… two… God, this felt good. "I fucked with your head… Now, let me fuck you real hard."

He turned me and made me face the wall. My hands were on the wall, looking for support although I knew that that wouldn't help at all. I moaned when I felt him going inside me.

"Holy shit," I moaned. His right hand traveled down to my clit and kept on massaging it as his hips buckled against mine. He was fast and unforgiving. He kept on thrusting until I couldn't do anything but moan. His left hand was on my hair, pulling it.

"You like this?" he asked as he pumped in and out of me.

"Y-yes," I moaned. I felt his teeth scraping on my neck. He kept on getting faster. Pumping and pumping and I kept on trying to match his pace but he was so fast. He fucked me real hard.

"Do you want me to make you come?" he whispered against my ear.

"Y-yes…"

"Yes what?" he said. I squeezed his length as an answer. I heard him groan. "Shit, Boe," I heard him moaning. Maybe I had been good… because he rammed me endlessly until I felt myself coming.

My knees felt so weak. Akala ko ay tapos na kami pero nagulat ako nang buhatin ako ni Night papunta sa kama. He threw my robe away and he quickly undressed—throwing his shirt until all I could focus on was his impressive length.

"Aren't you tired?" I asked as he crawled to me. Every second felt longer than the last.

"I never get tired of fucking, Belinda," he said and then dipped his

head and took one of my nipples in his mouth. The other one was being fondled by his hand. "Especially when it's with you."

I bit my lip but the question came out.

"Even Laurie?" He stopped kissing my breast when I mentioned her name. I smiled. "Don't worry, I know you loved Laurie."

I didn't take it against him. And I would never take it against him. If anything, I was thankful that it was Laurie he fell in love with. We both loved her… only if she didn't make the wrong decision.

"Can we not talk about her?" he asked.

"It's alright, Night. Alam ko na mahal mo siya."

His jaw clenched. "Do you want us to talk about Avo, then? How he fucked you first?"

And this time, it was my jaw who clenched. I raised my hand and slapped his face. I wanted to slap him again but he caught my hand.

"Did he fuck you good, huh, Belinda? Did he fuck you better than me?" he asked as I felt his length going inside me. He began slowly… I could feel him filling me. My lips parted at the sensation he was giving. "Did he make you come like I did?"

I nodded.

"What did you do with him, Belinda? Tell me so that I can fuck you better," he said as he slowly fucked me.

"Faster, Night," I moaned. I wanted to be fucked hard. And fast.

"Tell me what he did to you first," he said, continuing this torture that he was doing. He was going slow… and I felt like dying.

"He kissed me… and then fucked me…" I whimpered.

"That's it?" he asked, still going too fucking slow. I nodded. "God, even in bed, he's still an ass." He pulled his length from me and before I could even protest, I felt his mouth on my core, his tongue lashing against my fold. I didn't know where to turn my head. I didn't know what to do with the sensation anymore. Pakiramdam ko ay sasabog na ako pero hindi ko maabot. What I was feeling was unexplainable. It was too fucking good. Oh, God…

He was sucking my bud when his fingers began to fuck me. My lips parted. My heart racing violently inside my chest. My hands clutched against the sheets. My legs wrapped around Night's neck.

"Oh, my God, don't stop!" I moaned violently as he made me feel things I never felt before.

He continued what he was doing. He didn't stop. I didn't want him to stop.

"Yes... yes..." I kept on moaning until I reached the top. My legs trembled around his neck. I felt so fucking good that I didn't even have the right words to explain it. But I wasn't even near recovering when I felt Night's length brushing against my clit. He was kneeling in front of me, holding his length and brushing it against me.

"Aren't you done yet?" I asked in ragged breathing.

"I haven't come yet," he said, still teasing me. He would push in his length only to pull it back. God, he was a fucking tease!

"Not yet?" I asked, my lips parted. I already came thrice!

He shook his head. "I'll see to it that you come at least thrice before I let myself come," he said, again teasing me. I bucked my hips and that caused his length to slid a quarter inside me. Just a fucking quarter because he's really huge. "You're quiet insatiable," he said, pulling himself out.

"And you're a fucking tease!" I groaned.

He chuckled and then held his length with his hand and began stroking it.

"You're fun to tease," he said, gently stroking himself. His eyes were on me as he played with himself. God, why did this feel so dirty yet so, so good?

Akma akong tatayo dahil naiinis na ako sa pambibiting ginawa niya nang itulak niya ulit ako pababa. He was above me, his hands pining mine. And again, I was trapped.

"Not yet, Boe. I'm not yet done with you," he said. I could feel his

length in front of my core. I wrapped my legs around him and then pushed my hips upward. My lips parted as he slowly filled me. Night's eyes were intensely staring at me as he started to invade my core. And when he was fully inside me, he pulled out and then pushed back in harshly. "Do you like it?"

I nodded. "More…"

His hips began to pound. He pounded endlessly. He pounded mercilessly. And I let him.

"Don't stop…" I moaned. I squeezed his length with my core and I saw his lips parting every time I did that. I did that again and again until I felt him trembling on top of me. His head were on the nook of my neck. His teeth were grazing against my skin. He was still inside me.

We stayed like that for a couple of minutes. We tried to regain our strength. I didn't know fucking could be this strenuous. I was running out of breath.

And a minute after, Night pulled himself out of me. He held his length and then stroke it. Whatever was left fell on top of my stomach. And while he was doing that, his eyes never left mine.

"And that's how you fuck, Belinda. Not like how Avo did you. Remember that."

Chapitre Quarante Et Un

"I'm still doing everything according to plan, I swear," I said to the air. I didn't even have my parents' body. They were taken by the *Ostenhaimers*. I couldn't every bury them. I couldn't properly mourn for them. So, how could I move on if they gave me no reason to forget everything? Everyday, I would remember how they took everything from me. I didn't even want to think about what they did to my parents.

Those fucking monsters. They deserve every inch of monster inside me.

"I promise you that I'd avenge your death… Because even if you think I'm a monster, I'm still your daughter. 'Di ba, 'My? You just hid me to protect me from myself? It's not because you didn't want me…" I bit my lip to keep my voice still. I didn't want to think that my own parents didn't want me. That even if they were scared of me, a part of them still wanted to take care of me. I was still their flesh and blood. I was still an Estrella… no matter how deranged I was.

"And for the business, I'm doing everything I can to manage it. But it's hard, you know? You never trained me, 'My. Before, I thought it was because you wanted to heed my request to have a peaceful life… Ngayon ko lang naiintindihan na ayaw niyo rin pala talaga na mapasok ako sa mundo niyo. You didn't want to expose me to all the killings because

what? You didn't want to give me an idea about how fun it would be?" I said and then laughed. "But guess what? I discovered it anyway." I looked up. And then down. I didn't know if heaven really did exist but if it did, hindi ako sigurado kung nasa taas nga ba ang mga magulang ko. So I looked down. Because if afterlife really did exist, sigurado ako na nasa ibaba ang mga kaluluwa ng magulang ko.

"If you're watching me from below, I already killed people… At first, it was out of rage. Maybe you already met Cathy and Ella. Sigurado naman kasi ako na dyan din sila sa baba pupunta. And if they ask about me, tell them I had no regrets. If I could, I'd kill them again."

The night of their death, I finally realized what was wrong with me. I had pretended that I didn't want it… but I loved taking lives. I loved being in control. I loved the thought of being able to take one's life with just a trigger.

"And Sandra's probably burning in hell with you, too. She's a fucking loyal bitch, you know? Hanggang sa pagkamatay niyo, kayo pa rin ang sinusunod niya. What a loyal bitch," I whispered. "Kindly tell her to give guidance to Angela. She's a fucking incompetent secretary. If not for Night, baka kung ano na ang nangyari sa organization…"

I knew Night's not one to be trusted. He always told me not to trust him… or anyone. Palaging sinasabi sa akin ng mga tao sa paligid ko na 'wag ko silang pagkatiwalaan. And I didn't want to trust anybody, too. I didn't want to give myself another round of disappointments. But with Night? I didn't know. I had different opinions of him. He made me change my mind often.

He had always been an enigma to me. And maybe that was the reason why I had always kept him close. I loved puzzles. And he was a puzzle that I had always wanted to solve.

"Don't worry, I wasn't as naive as I was before. I don't trust him. And I probably will never be able to trust anyone again. It's all thanks to you both. You made me this distrusting person because of all your lies," I said. My lips were quivering but I stayed still. I just wanted to let

everything out. My chest felt heavy. For the first time, I wanted to talk to my parents and just tell them everything that I thought and felt.

"I'm just using him because I can't handle everything yet. But don't worry, I'm watching over him closely. I won't let him drag me down. I won't let him betray me. Alam niyo kung bakit? Kasi ayoko pang mamatay. I don't want to see you both yet. Because I know that if I die, sa ibaba rin ako pupunta... And I honestly have no qualms about it. Ngayon pa lang kasi, ramdam ko na na nasusunog ang kaluluwa ko."

I wanted to see Oli but even I knew that it wasn't possible. Oli wouldn't be down there. He'd be up, I was sure. Oli was one of the kindest souls I knew. He didn't like killing. He didn't like the violence. He must've hated being forced to take over the business just because I couldn't. Ang malas niya sa pamilya. He had
monsters as his parents and me as his sister. We're really a poster family.

I stayed for a while. I closed my eyes and let the cold wind touch my skin.

"I'll see you both... when I'm done destroying everyone," I said before I stood up.

When I returned home, I saw Night and Lorenzo playing chess.

"What are you doing here?"

Lorenzo just shrugged. "Am I not welcomed here?"

"No," I quickly replied. I faced Night. "How's shipment?"

The ammos needed to be shipped as soon as possible. In our line of business, lack of ammunition would mean death. Sa dami ng kaaway namin, hindi na ako nagugulat tuwing may nagsasabi sa akin na tinambangan ang mga tauhan ko. So I always made sure that they're equipped with tools to protect themselves and to destroy anyone who tried to kill them. And I didn't want to lose more of my men. It's hard to

find people—even harder to find capable ones. Just take Angela as an example. She always made me miss Sandra.

Night moved his rook and then stood up and kissed my cheek. "It's going smoothly," he said and then snaked his hand around my waist. "Woke up and you're gone."

I eyed Lorenzo who was still focused on determining his next move. He didn't seem to care. He never seemed to care about business that would not affect him. He only meddled with me before because he wanted me to kill his parents. And now that he finally got what he wanted, he didn't care about whatever I wanted to do anymore. He was already contented watching from the sidelines. He just liked seeing me destroy myself and everyone else around me.

"Went somewhere."

"You should've woken me up," he said, his lips just an inch away from mine.

I looked at him, his eyes unwavering. Didn't he love Laurie anymore? Or was he just playing one of his sick games with me? With Night, I always had to second-guess everything.

"You seemed tired so I didn't try," I replied, my face remaining impassive. I didn't want him to think that I had any feelings for him. I already made that fault with Avo. I wouldn't repeat the same mistake. I believed that I wasn't that stupid.

Night raised his hand and gently caressed my cheek with his fingers. "Well, yeah," he said, the side of his lips rising. "You kept me up all night."

"Checkmate!"

Bigla kaming napatigil sa pagtingin sa isa't-isa nang magsalita si Lorenzo. We both looked at him while he was happily smiling. He's a fucking weird human being. I really didn't understand Lorenzo and his obsession with chess.

"Aalis ka na?" I asked when I saw Lorenzo standing up. He nodded. "So… you just went here to play chess?"

"Yes," he replied and then looked at Night. "Our deal."

Night nodded. Kumunot ang noo ko. What deal? I wanted to ask but I was sure no one would tell me. But something between Night and Lorenzo made me feel uneasy. It made me want to discover what they're hiding but I was sure that the more I try to pry, the more they'd be trying to keep everything from me.

Individually, they're both cunning individuals. But together? This was catastrophic.

Dumiretso kami ni Night para kumain. As food were served, I kept on glancing at his face. He seemed normal but maybe because hiding something was just a piece of cake for him. He had always hide all these things from me. I wouldn't be surprised if Night knew all the things I wanted to know. Sometimes, I just wanted to crack his head open to know everything he's been hiding from me.

"Night," I called his name. He looked at me while he was chewing food. There was a mess near his lips. I motioned for him to wipe it but he just creased his forehead at me. Napailing na lang ako at saka tumayo at lumapit sa kanya. I picked up the napkin and then wiped it for him.

"Thanks, baby."

"Don't call me that."

"What?" He shrugged. "Baby?"

"Yes. It's disgusting."

"It's sweet."

"We're fucking, Night, we're not together," I said, reminding him. The last thing I wanted was to be in another relationship. I didn't want any of it. I already had it before and it brought me nothing but pain and stress. I didn't want a rerun of it.

"You're really sweet, you know?" he said and I just arched a brow at him. Mabuti na na malinaw kung ano kami. And it wasn't as if he had any feelings for me. If I didn't have any, mas sigurado ako na wala si Night. He was the one who always told me that feelings just mess everything up. And he'd always reminded me how he didn't have a heart.

So breaking his non-existing heart would be the last thing I would worry.

"When will I see Avo?" I asked. This was the reason why he's with me. He promised me that he'd bring me Avo. And it had been weeks since Lorenzo brought him to me. Waiting was starting to bore me. I was already tempted to send my people to Germany to grab Avo and bring him to me. Pagkatapos ng mga nakita kong litrato? Grabbing Avo in public seemed like a piece of cake.

"If you see Avo, what will you do with Ayo?" he asked instead.

"I'll kill him," I replied.

"Then?"

"I'll send both of their heads to their parents, in hopes to anger them even further. And then they'd want to kill me for doing it. And then I'd force them out of hiding. Then I'll slowly torture them until they beg for their deaths but I won't give it to them. Killing is too easy, it's too forgiving for everything they did to me." Unti-unting humihigpit ang hawak ko sa kutsilyo tuwing naiisip ko ang mga magulang ni Avo. Those monsters... Sila ang may kasalanan ng lahat ng 'to. If only they didn't involve my parents, hindi mangyayari ang lahat ng 'to.

If only they didn't involve me, I'd give them Ayo back.

And if only they didn't think the worst of me, I wouldn't give them the monster they were afraid of.

"You already planned this out, haven't you?"

"Every single day," I replied. "I even dream about it." I dreamed about the day when I'll finally get to see the people who took my family away from me."

I haven't seen the head of the *Ostenhaimers* but I knew that they were devils incarnate. They sacrificed their own son—they sent Ayo to his death tapos ay sila ang magagalit sa mga magulang ko? They're screwed up just like me! So whatever hell I was giving them, they deserved every inch of it! And much more!

"So, answer me, Night," I said, looking him in the eyes. "When will I see Avo?"

I stared at him. I wanted him to feel the urgency in my voice. I wanted to see Avo. I wanted to make him pay for everything he did to me. I wanted him to feel every inch of pain he made me go through… I wanted to rip his heart from his chest and then crush it into million pieces—just like how he did with mine. Just
like how he made me taste pain until it's the only thing I know of…

He fucking took everything from me. Sisiguraduhin ko na walang matitira sa kanya kapag natapos ako.

"Next week."

My breathing hitched. Bumilis ang tibok ng puso ko. My hands slightly trembled.

"Next week?" I repeated, making sure I heard it right.

Night nodded. "Next week, I'll bring him to you, Boe."

"H-how?" My voice faltered but that was the least of my concern. Ang tanging mahalaga lang sa akin sa oras na ito ay ang katotohanan na malapit ko ng makita si Avo. Malapit ko na siyang mahawakan. Malapit ko na siyang masaktan. I couldn't wait until I get to see his face and look at him while I slowly take everything he hold dear…

Everything. I promise to take everything from him.

"I have a plan," he said, smiling.

"Do you need more men?" I asked.

"I don't need anyone."

Kumunot ang noo ko. "What do you mean?"

"He'll willingly come to you, Boe."

My lips parted. "What?" Hindi ko maintindihan ang sinasabi ni Night. Why would Avo even come to me? He knew that coming to me would mean his death kaya bakit siya lalapit sa akin? I hated him. I hated every fiber inside his body. And I wanted to kill him using my own hands. I wanted to feel as life escapes his body. That's the only thing that kept me going—the thought of taking his life.

Kaya… bakit siya lalapit sa akin? Nababaliw na ba siya kagaya ko? Did he finally give up on life like I wanted him to?

But instead of answering my question, Night pushed the plate of bread near me. "Eat," he said.

"Night!" I raised my voice. I didn't have time for another one of his games.

"Eat up, Boe, you'll need it."

I clenched my jaw. "I don't want to play with you. Tell me why he's coming."

Night looked at me. His eyes back to its cold form. This was the Night I knew. This was the Night that used to scare me. This was the Night who didn't care about killing anyone who'd get in his way.

"Why is it even important, Belinda? He's coming… isn't it all that matters?" he asked.

I pursed my lips. He was right. Pupunta si Avo. Iyon ang mahalaga… pero bakit may iba akong nararamdaman? Na parang may hindi tama? Na pagkatapos ng ilang buwan na pagtatago sa akin ni Avo, bigla na lang siyang magpapakita?

Something was definitely wrong.

Something was missing.

Ako na naman ang walang alam.

Chapitre Quarante Deux

"Stay here and rest," Night said like he was the fucking boss of me. Tinaasan ko siya ng kilay. Since when did he think he has the right to order me around? Nakalimutan na ba niya kung nakaninong bahay siya? He's in my property and here, my words were law.

"I'm going with you," I said, cocking my head. Just because we're sleeping together didn't mean that I'd let him control me. Gone were the days when I'd let people walk all over me. Iyon iyong mga panahon na hindi ko gusto ang mundong ginagalawan ko. I tried so hard to conceal who I really was... and that ended up with me being hurt. Because even if I tried to protect everyone, I always ended up hurting those around me. Pakiramdam ko, tinadhana ako para saktan lahat ng tao sa paligid ko.

I was past caring. All I wanted to do was to prevent myself from getting hurt again. I didn't want anyone close. I kept everyone at a distance.

Night looked at me, obviously frustrated that I kept on challenging everything that he said. I just didn't want him to mistake us sleeping around to me being submissive to him. Dalawang magkaibang bagay iyon.

"You're so stubborn."

"Deal with it," I replied. That's the only way around. I didn't plan on

changing myself just to fit whatever he wanted me to become. I went to my room to change clothes but as I was picking what to wear, I suddenly felt dizzy. Napaupo ako sa kama at napahawak sa ulo ko. Sinubukan kong tumayo pero tuwing sinusubukan ko, mas lalo lang akong nahihilo.

I stayed still for a while, trying to regain my balance again. Nang medyo matagal na akong nakaupo, naka-rinig ako ng katok sa pinto. I wanted to open the door because I was sure that it was Night. After all, he was the only one who had the gut to actually bother me when I was inside my room. Pero dahil sa pag-ikot ng paningin ko, hindi ko nagawang buksan. And after a minute, the door opened.

"Aren't you done?" he asked. When he saw me on the bed, agad niya akong nilapitan. "Are you okay?" he continued, his voice laced with worry.

"I'm okay," I said, trying to shrug it off. I didn't want him to see me as weak. "Just give me a minute."

Night sighed. "I told you, just stay here and rest. I'll deal with the business."

I looked at him. "Why are you so keen on making me stay? May itinatago ka ba sa akin?"

"If I'm hiding something, trust me, I won't be as obvious as this," he said and then gently pushed me back to bed. Hindi na ako naka-palag dahil patuloy pa rin sa pag-ikot ang paningin ko. He tucked me inside and then brushed the stray strands of hair from my face. His thumb was caressing my cheek. "Just do yourself a favor and rest, alright?"

"Why?"

"Just think of this as you preparing for Avo's return."

My lips parted at the mention of his name. Akala ko, sanay na ako. But every time I heard his name, I could still feel the rush in my heart. The sound of his name was enough to push my system into an overdrive. He still had the same effect on me. After all this time. Still the same.

"When will he return?"

"You'll know."

"I want a definite date, Night. I don't like surprises. Lalo na kung tungkol sa kanya."

I wanted to show him that I was not the same girl that he made a fool of. Iba na ako. I was much stronger than I was before... much ruthless from the naive girl he took me for. He extracted every good thing in me hanggang sa puro masama na lamang ang matira.

"I don't know exactly but I expect him to come next week," Night replied.

"Paano ka nakaka-sigurado na dadating siya?"

Avo was a cunning human being. Kung nagawa niyang isakripisyo ang kapatid niya, nagawa niya akong paglaruan kahit na wala akong alam sa mga nangyayari, ano ang kasiguraduhan namin na susunod siya sa kung anuman ang usapan nila ni Night? Night should've known better. Avo's words were nothing but lies...

'I'll destroy anyone who dares hurt you.'

Fucking lies.

"He will," he replied, looking straight into my eyes.

"How sure are you?"

Night smiled and then again caressed my face. "Because the thing he values the most is in my possession."

"What—"

He cut me off and stood up. "No more questions, Belinda. Take a rest and if possible, stay in bed. I'll be back in a few hours," sabi niya at saka nagsimulang maglakad. Bago pa niya mabuksan ang pinto, nagawa kong magsalita muli.

"Who are you seeing?"

"Claire."

Agad na tumaas ang kilay ko. "Her again?"

Night arched a brow. "Yeah. Do you have a problem with that?"

I pursed my lips. "Nothing," I said and then clutched the sheet close to me. "Say hi to her for me."

Night chuckled. "Alright," he said and then went out. Manwhore. He barely let me sleep at night tapos nagagawa pa niyang humanap ng ibang babae? He's unbelievable and insatiable. Wala siyang kapaguran!

Though I didn't want to agree on anything Night says, I did fall asleep… for too long, even. Nang magising ako ay gabi na. Tumayo ako dahil nakaramdam ako ng gutom. Pagdating ko sa kusina, nakita ko si Angela. I fought the urge to roll my eyes. Tuwing nakikita ko talaga siya ay naiinis ako. She's just too incompetent. Hindi ko alam kung bakit nandito pa rin siya. Night was the one doing all the job.

"Any update?" I asked. Baka kapag nakarinig ako ng magandang balita mula sa kanya ay mabawasan ang init ng dugo ko. Since she wasn't that good in handling the business, I just let her babysit Ayo. I figured she could at least do that. Sobrang tanga naman niya kung pati pag-aalaga sa isang tao na nakagapos sa kama ay hindi pa niya magagawa ng maayos.

"Ayo's fine, Miss Belinda. He's eating on time and we're making sure that he's still alive and breathing."

I nodded. "Prepare him for next week."

"For what, Miss Belinda?"

I smiled to myself. "If things go according to plan, we're finally disposing him." And hopefully, his whole family, too. I couldn't wait until I kill the last person carrying the *Ostenhaimer* blood. I seek to destroy them all—kagaya ng ginawa nilang pag-ubos sa pamilya ko. Kung hindi pa ako itinago ng mga magulang ko mula sa mga tao, sigurado ako na pati ako ay susubukang patayin. Too bad they didn't kill me… they just gave me the chance to take their pathetic lives.

"Alright, Miss Belinda. I'll make sure that Ayo will be ready for... whatever's going to happen next week," Angela said.

A smile crept up to my face. "That will be wonderful."

After Angela left, I asked the chef to prepare food—more like a feast. I didn't know but I felt so good. Nitong mga nakaraang araw, palagi na lang akong galit dahil pakiramdam ko ay walang nangyayari. I felt like I was just wasting my time. Na imbes na madaliin ko ang pagganti, mas inuubos ko ang oras ko sa ibang bagay. And lately, my mood was starting to uplift again. Things were starting to happen... after months of waiting in vain.

After months of hating Avo.

After months of planning my revenge.

Finally, something's happening. And it was all thanks to Night.

Kahit na hindi ko pa rin alam kung ano ang binabalak niya o kung ano ang makukuha niya sa ginagawa niyang pagtulong sa akin, that was the least of my concerns. I just wanted my revenge—let other things be damned. It had been too long. I had let them live in peace for too long.

Hindi ko rin alam kung ano ang ginawa ni Night o kung anuman ang hawak niya na magiging dahilan ng pagsuko ni Avo. But after everything Night and I had been through? What I learned about him was that he could make things happen.

And I had always known that Night was the person to be wary of...

That it was him who was the *most dangerous* guy in the school. Because he didn't play by the rules. And he never would.

Sinubukan ko na hintayin si Night pero bago pa man siya makabalik, hinatak na naman ako ng tulog. I didn't know what time he came back but I felt his arms snaking around my waist. I was too sleepy to even ask him questions so I just let him sleep with me.

When morning rolled in, Night was still sleeping. It was unusual of him. Madalas ay nauuna siyang magising kaysa sa akin. Since we started sleeping together, he'd usually get up earlier to prepare food for me. So seeing him still sleeping was foreign.

Tinitigan ko ang mukha niya. He looked peaceful in his slumber. Hindi mo mahahalata na isa siyang tao na kayang pumatay. I could still remember the first time I saw him killing.

Those poor girls were trembling in fear. They should've known. They were messing with the wrong people.

"We're not doing anything wrong. We're in the same level! We're all Deuxième!"

"Ah, I see," Night said. That cold voice again.

"So you're saying that if I kill you, it won't be wrong since I'm above you?"

"B-bakit mo 'yun gagawin? Laurie's not your girlfriend anymore!"

And then silence.

"I know."

And then I felt fear embrace the room.

"But you don't mess with the people close to me."

And then shots were fired.

And then there was shiver in my spine. Every time I would remember how he sounded that day, I would be reminded of how scary Night could get. He wasn't the kind of guy who would give threats. He just does it. Magugulat ka na lang, patay ka na. He's that kind of person.

But here, looking at him sleeping, you wouldn't even think that he's a lunatic when he's awake.

"Don't stare," he mumbled.

"I'm not," I quickly replied.

"I could feel holes bored on me," he said in his still raspy voice. "What time is it?"

I looked at the clock on the night stand. "It's 9 in the morning," I said. "What time did you return?" Ano ba ang ginawa nila nung Claire na iyon para gabihin siya ng ganito? Even when it was still me who was handling the business, I always made sure na hindi ako aabutin ng gabi sa labas. My life was constantly at risk. Even I wasn't stupid enough to let myself be a sitting duck for all my enemies. Kaya hindi ko alam kung ano ang

ginawa ni Night para abutin siya ng gabi. He was much more efficient than me... surely, he did side-business kaya ginabi siya.

"Around 11," he said and then pulled me back to bed with him.

"Ikaw ba mismo ang gumawa ng bala kaya inabot ka ng ganoong oras?"

He chuckled and then kissed the side of my face. "I finished business with Claire around 5PM and then went to Lorenzo after," he said. "Why do you always think that I'm going to screw Claire?" he continued and then cupped the center of my thighs. "This is plenty enough for me."

"Night!" nanlalaki ang mata na sabi ko.

"What?" he said, stroking me while I was still completely dressed. "Don't like it?"

"I'm hungry," I said instead.

"Me, too," he said and then pulled me until I was on top of him. "But I'm hungry for you more."

And then he kissed my lips. I wanted to protest but his kisses drowned my protest. The way his lips moved against mine, he rendered me thoughtless. The way his hands touched me, he made me speechless. And the way he made me writhe above him, he made me reckless.

"I'll never trade you for Claire," he said, kissing my neck. His hand was inside my shirt, feeling my breast. I could never concentrate on anything with the way his fingers tug my nipple. All I could do was moan.

And then moan some more.

This was what he made me do every time he's like this. I was a fucking mess. And I was his mess.

"You're fucking perfect, Boe," he whispered.

"Perfectly screwed," I replied.

He looked at me, his eyes drunk from our kisses. "We're both screwed in the head," he said, his other hand on my face. I wanted to avoid his gaze but I couldn't. His eyes were like magnet and I was attracted and I couldn't do anything but to stare back.

"What you did and what you're doing, it's not your fault," he said.

"It's my fault."

"They pushed you... *I* pushed you." I pursed my lips. I tried to get off of him but he held me in place. "We played with you, Boe. We all knew who you were and we all participated in this charades because we were all scared of what you would become."

I didn't want to listen to another one of his stories. What happened in *AdM* should stay in that damned place. I didn't want to return. I didn't want another memory of that place. If I had a choice, I'd burn that place to the grounds until nothing was left. At isasama ko na rin iyong headmistress na masunog. She may not have a first hand on what happened to me but I knew she just turned a blind eye to everything that happened.

She deserved what she got. She deserved getting her family murdered. Lorenzo was ruthless. That school really did a number on him... o baka naman pareho lamang kami na may sira sa ulo.

But who could blame us? We were raised to be killers... so why were people surprised to see us killing? Why were they asking for mercy when we were taught to be merciless?

Kindness was a concept foreign to us. I tried to embrace it but I got burned.

And now, there's no turning back.

"I don't need your apology. What I need is retribution."

His hands were on the side of my waist, massaging.

"You'd get it."

"I know," I replied. "Because I won't stop. This is what I'm living for, Night. If not for the need to get back at the *Ostenhaimers* for what they did to my family, I don't think I will be able to last this long."

Humigpit ang hawak niya sa akin.

"I'm here. I got you."

I stared at him.

"I don't need anyone." Not anymore.

"I know," he said. "But I want you to know that I'm here, Belinda.

And when you're done with Avo, I still won't leave you." His eyes were saying this but I knew better than to trust Nightly. His words were lies. Gaya ng sinabi ni Lorenzo, sa sampung sinabi ni Night, isa lang ang totoo. I wasn't a fool like I was before. Promises wouldn't buy my trust.

"Alright," I just said to get him off my back. "But what about your parents?"

Something crossed his eyes but Night being Night, he was quick to hide
whatever it was. "They'll be fine."

"You're their heir. Surely they're looking for you."

But even before he could answer and I could press him more, he flipped me over until I was on my back and he was hovering above me.

"No more questions," he said and then drowned me in his kisses once again.

And I fucking let myself get drowned.

Chapitre Quarante Trois

Days passed by quickly. Bawat araw ay nilaan ko sa pagdating ni Avo. I had waited long enough. I had waited for *too* long. And finally, my waiting was finally over.

"This was taken last night," Night said, handing me a new batch of pictures of Avo. He was last spotted at a private airport just hours before he disappeared again.

"My people tried to tail him but he was quick to disappear."

"It's alright," I said as I continued to look at the photos. This felt real. Nandito na talaga siya. Nagbalik na talaga siya.

"You're not mad?" Night asked.

Tinignan ko siya. "Why will I be mad?"

"Because I screwed up. I promised I'll bring him to you but—"

I cut him off before he started to make a fool of himself. I didn't know what was with him. He was trying too hard to impress me—as if I wasn't impressed enough. Night was practically the one running the business on my behalf. And although he was the one doing it, I still made sure that I oversee everything. If it wasn't too much, I'd make him wear a tracking device just to make sure that he wouldn't fuck with me. Hindi ko siya pinapabayaan na pumunta mag-isa. I wanted to have eyes everywhere and my people fear me. They knew I had no room for mercy in my being.

If I had an idea of someone betraying me, I would be quick to take a life. I didn't want another betrayal to add to my list. Tama na iyong mga nangyari dati.

"He's here. It's more than what I managed to accomplish this past two months."

I tried everything. I sent him fingers of his brothers... kulang na lang ay pati ulo ng kapatid niya ay ipadala ko sa kanya. None of this moved him. None made him want to come back.

And he loved his brother! I was sure of it. He played me to save his brother kaya hindi ko maintindihan kung bakit wala siyang pakielam sa mga nangyayari kay Ayo. At ngayon bigla na lang siyang babalik sa Pilipinas?

I had no idea what Night got on him but it was good. He's finally back.

And Philippines was my territory. Hindi ko hahayaan na malamangan niya ako sa mismong lugar ko.

"Still."

"Let's not look at this negatively," I told him. "I have people everywhere. I'll locate him... Or if you're right, he'll willingly come to me."

I looked at Night to see if he was willing to tell me kung ano ang kailangan ni Avo pero wala siyang balak na magsabi ng kahit na ano. I didn't push him, though. If he didn't want to say anything, then it's fine.

Everything would be revealed in the right time.

"Let's just eat and celebrate," I said and then went to the dining area. Pansamantala, hindi muna namin pinag-usapan si Avo kahit na iyon na lang ang tanging laman ng utak ko. I wanted to see him again... to see his face as I destroy everything he held dear. Hanggang ngayon, hindi ko pa rin napapagdesisyunan kung sino ang uunahin ko. I knew Avo went to the country alone. Hindi niya kasama ang demonyo niyang mga magulang.

If I was mad at Avo, I was furious at his parents.

At kapag natapos na ako kay Avo at Ayo, sisiguraduhin ko na ipapadala ko sa kanila ang pira-pirasong katawan ng mga anak nila. I would make sure that they'd live long enough to feel what they made me feel when they took my family away from me.

And so much more. I would not get even. I would do more than what they gave me.

When we were done eating, doon kami dumiretso sa labas para magpahangin. There were people everywhere so I was sure that I was safe. Money surely does buy everything.

"When we're done, you can leave," I told him. I didn't want him to be here with me after I was done with Avo. Hinayaan ko siyang manatili sa tabi ko dahil siya ang makakapagdala sa akin kay Avo. And now that Avo's already within my reach, Night had already reached the end of his usefulness.

"Don't worry, I already get the hang of the business. I'll be able to handle it well," I said. I was thankful for all the help but I didn't want to be dependent on him. Or attached.

I didn't want to depend my life on anyone anymore. I didn't want protecting.

I didn't want promises when I knew they're meant to be broken.

"Do you really want me gone?" he asked.

"Yes."

I stared at his eyes. I wanted him to feel that I was serious. I didn't want him with me any longer. I could already feel myself getting attached and I would like to severe that connection before it gets too deep.

Sa lahat ng tao, kay Night ako pinaka-walang tiwala. It didn't matter if he was helping me now because I knew that sooner or later, he'd be the one to turn his back on me. And I had enough people who turned their backs on me. Ayoko ng dagdagan pa.

"You already outlived your worth, Night."

He clenched his jaw. "You're a piece of work."

"I know. I already talked to your parents. I told them how cooperative you are and I'll fully compensate you for every help you gave me."

From where I was sitting, I could see how he was clenching his fist. Why was he taking this so negatively? Hindi ba ganito naman talaga? Naggagamitan lang naman talaga kami. Ginagamit ako ni Lorenzo. Ginagamit ako ni Night. Ginagamit nila ako.

Sanay ako. Wala akong kaibigan. I only had people using me and who I was using.

"And what about the other thing?" he asked.

I creased my brow. "What other thing?"

"Us fucking."

I pursed my lips and prevented myself from giving anything away. My face remained stoic. "It's what you call it, Night. It's *fucking*," I said, meaning every word. "Or do you want to be compensated for it, too? Because that would make you a whore."

Imbes na sumagot, tumayo na lang siya at iniwanan ako. I, on the other hand, enjoyed the food. After all, it was him who said that I needed energy for my meeting with Avo.

Pagkatapos kong kumain, agad akong pumunta sa kwarto ni Ayo. Nitong mga nakaraang araw, hindi ko siya pinupuntahan dahil sa takot ko na bigla ko na lang siyang mapatay. Ayo's tongue was sharp. Pinutulan ko na't lahat pero matapang pa rin. Manang-mana sa kapatid niyang demonyo.

But I was in such a good disposition that I was sure that Ayo wouldn't be able to get into my head. Kahit ano pa ang sabihin niya, masaya ako. Because finally, things were falling to their right places.

"Good afternoon."

Agad na nakuha ko ang atensyon ni Ayo.

"The devil's here again," he whispered loud enough for me to head.

"You're right. Your brother's back."

Mas lalo kong nakuha ang atensyon niya. Naupo ako sa couch at saka pinagmasdan siyang mabuti. Who knew? This might be the last time I'd

be able to see him. Baka kasi bukas, patay na siya.

"He just got here last night. So, give me at least a week to kill him."

"You bi—"

"Bitch?" pagtutuloy ko sa sasabihin niya. "Please. That word doesn't even affect me. I know I'm a bitch, Ayo. I'm also evil. I'm also crazy. I don't care. What I know is that I'll finally be able to kill your brother so your words do not really bother me at all."

I smiled at him and even crossed my fit. Ayo tried to get up but he was carefully tied to the bed. After all, kung papabayaan siya ni Angela na makatakas, siya ang itatali ko sa kama tutal wala naman siyang silbi sa akin.

"He'll kill you!" he shouted.

"I'll kill him. And when I'm done with him, you're next."

"You monster!"

I laughed at him. He's so helpless. Kagaya ko dati. This must be what Avo was feeling when he was playing with me. He must have felt like a god playing with a mere human.

"You should die first!" he roared.

Tumayo ako at hinawakan iyong mukha niya. "I will die... when my time comes. Pero sisiguraduhin ko na mauuna ka. At ang kapatid mo. At ang demonyo mong mga magulang!" And then I slapped him.

Lumayo ako ng kaunti. I shouldn't kill him yet. Mas mabuti siguro na patayin ko siya sa harap ng kapatid niya.

"Rest, Ayo. But I don't recommend sleeping since you'll be doing a lot of that when you're dead," sabi ko at saka nagsimulang maglakad palabas. Upon leaving his room, bigla akong napahawak sa pader dahil bigla akong nakaramdam ng hilo.

Nang idilat ko ang mga mata ko, agad akong nakakita ng isang hindi pamilyar na mukha. I tried to get up but my head was pounding real

hard.

"Miss Belinda," the woman said. Nang mas linawan ko ang paningin ko, napagtanto ko na si Dr. Vargas pala ang nasa harapan ko.

"What happened?" I said, my voice hoarse. I felt so weak. Was I sick? Pero bakit ngayon pa? Kung kailan kailangan ko ng lahat ng lakas dahil sa pagdating ni Avo!

"You fainted yesterday so Angela called me in."

"What?!" I exclaimed. "Yesterday?!"

Dr. Vargas nodded. She wasn't scared of me. I liked that about her.

"You were out for about 16 hours, Miss Belinda."

Sinubukan kong tumayo pero mas lalo lang kumirot ang ulo ko. What was happening to me?

"I suggest bed rest for a while."

"Not happening," I replied. I had lots of things to do... and lots of people to kill. Now wasn't the time for rest.

"It'll be bad for your health."

"I don't give a damn about my health."

Sinubukan kong tanggalin iyong mga nakasaksak sa akin kahit na nasasaktan ako. I was about to stand up to look for Night and demand for another update when Dr. Vargas spoke again.

"If you don't care about your health, then at least consider looking after the welfare of your baby."

Agad na napatigil ako.

My heart started to race inside my chest.

My breathing became ragged.

My lips were parted.

"W-what?"

Dr. Vargas looked at me.

"You're 11 weeks pregnant, Miss Belinda. Congratulations."

No.

Chapitre Quarante Quatre

"You're mistaken. I'm not pregnant. I can't be pregnant!" I shouted. I reached for anything close to me and then threw it across the wall. I didn't care if I hurt anyone. This couldn't be happening to me! Hindi pwede na buntis ako!

And I was what? 11 weeks pregnant?! What the fuck was she saying?! Na dinadala ko ang anak ng demonyong 'yun?!

That after hating him and dreaming about his death, I was pregnant with his child?! Niloloko ba niya ako?!

"Calm down," she said.

"Don't tell me to fucking calm down pagkatapos ng sinabi mo sa akin!" I shouted again. "How the fuck am I pregnant?!"

"I tested your blood when you were asleep," she explained. "If you're hesitant, I have pregnancy kits you can use," she said and then handed me some. Mabilis ko iyong binato.

My chest was heaving in anger.

My eyes were starting to see red.

I was feeling livid.

"Get out," I said.

Agad na tumayo si Dr. Vargas. She was looking at me. She knew I was mad and it would be a wise decision not to get on my bad side. I was

already pissed beyond death.

"Just... take care, Miss Belinda. Always remember that it's not just you anymore. You're carrying another person with you."

"Leave!" I shouted.

I stilled. I didn't move. I couldn't move. I couldn't fully comprehend what was happening.

I was pregnant? Kay Avo? Ginagago ba talaga ako ng mundo? Pagkatapos ng lahat ng nangyari, ito ang makukuha ko? Hindi pa ba sapat na nawala ang buong pamilya ko? Now, I was also carrying another one of their fucking blood.

I hated everyone carrying the blood of *Ostenhaimer* and now, someone of the same blood was growing inside me.

Hindi ako makapaniwala.

Ayokong maniwala.

Panaginip.

Isa lang itong panaginip. Hindi totoo na dinadala ko ang anak ni Avo. Hindi pwede. Ayokong magkaroon ng anak sa demonyong iyon. Pagkatapos niya akong paglaruan, ito ang ibibigay niya sa akin? Wasn't it enough that he messed with my head, now, he wanted to mess with my whole life?!

My chest was still heaving in anger as I contemplated on what to do.

"Belinda."

A voice. That familiar voice.

"Did you know?" I asked him. Night was standing before me. He didn't even look as shocked as I was. Like this wasn't a surprise at all. I didn't know if he was just this good at hiding what he was feeling or he knew it all along. "Kaya mo ba sinabi sa akin na si Avo mismo ang lalapit dahil alam mo na buntis ako?"

Was this the reason why he kept on telling me to rest? Why he always cooked for me?

Did he play me once again?

Na kahit ilang beses kong sabihin na hindi na ako papayag na

paglaruan niya, patuloy lang siyang nakakahanap ng dahilan para paglaruan ako.

"Yes," he replied. He didn't even bother to lie.

"Since when?"

"About 3 weeks."

My jaw clenched. "You knew for 3 weeks and you didn't even bother to tell me?"

"For what? For you to think of ways to kill the baby?"

"What do you know?! This is my life!" I shouted at him.

Lumapit siya sa akin at hinawakan ang mga kamay ko para pigilan ako. I tried to throw things at him. I was furious at him for trying to control my life again! Akala ko tapos na ako sa ganito! Akala ko wala ng tao na paglalaruan ako! I felt like I was living in my nightmare again! That people were making a fool out of me and making me their puppet!

"Calm down," he said.

"I won't fucking calm down!" I shouted.

"It'll be bad for the baby."

"There will be no baby! I don't want a part of him inside me!"

The thought of having a part of Avo growing inside me was making me vicious. I didn't want a part of a devil inside me! Even the sound of his name made me shake in anger!

"Get me Dr. Vargas and make her remove this baby!" I shouted in rage. I tried to stand but Night pinned me down. His face was only an inch away from mine.

"Breathe."

"Don't tell me to fucking breathe!"

"Calm down."

"I will calm down once this thing is taken away!"

He neared his face.

"This is the reason why I didn't tell you," he said. "I knew that if you learned, the first thing you'll do is to abort the baby."

"And you didn't think I'd notice? This is my body, Night! I get to

decide what to do with this!" I said and then tried to get away from his grip but he was holding me too strong.

I wanted to slap him for trying to control my life but all I wanted to do was to take this baby away from me.

I didn't want this.

Not even a bit.

"Think, Belinda," he whispered.

"I'm thinking! And I want this baby removed!"

He clenched his jaw. "You're not thinking," sabi niya at unti-unti akong binitiwan. Tumayo ako at nagsimulang maglakad palabas. I wanted this removed from my body as soon as possible. Iniisip ko pa lang na may parte ni Avo sa loob ng katawan ko ay pakiramdam ko parang mawawalan ako ng tamang pag-iisip.

"This is the reason why Avo's here."

Natigilan ako.

"He wants this baby."

I stilled.

"Think about it, Belinda. Avo loves his brother but even Ayo isn't enough to get him out of hiding. You can cut Ayo all you want but you won't be able to get close to Avo. He's an *Ostenhaimer* for a reason."

I didn't move. I let him talk even though I knew that every word coming from his mouth was meant to assuage me.

"He can hide and you'll never find him... but with this baby, you can control him."

He took a step closer.

"He wants this baby, Belinda. Use it."

He held my arm.

"You can make him do what you want."

I clenched my jaw. "I want to kill him."

His hand rubbed my arm and began to trace circles on it. "I'm sure he'll do that... but make him kill his parents for you."

Natigilan ako sa sinabi niya at napaharap sa kanya. "What?"

Night cupped my face. There was a glint in his eyes. "You probably haven't realized this yet but Belinda, Avo will do anything for you... you must realize that."

"No."

"Yes," he replied. "His parents were able to control him because he loves Ayo. But with you, he didn't even care about Ayo."

"Because he's a devil who only cares about himself," I replied.

"Maybe. But without Avo's help, you won't even be able to take a glimpse of his parents. You're probably at the top here, but they're at the top in the other side of the world. They're untouchable."

Naiintindihan ko ang sinasabi niya. *Ostenhaimer's* influence here in Asia might not be as great as mine but in Europe, they were feared. And since they're staying in France, there's nothing I could do here but pray that they're stupid enough to come to me.

"Make him kill his parents for you."

"He won't do that."

Night smiled at me and caressed my cheek. "He will," he said. "With the right words from you, he will do as you bid, Belinda."

"Why?"

Why would he do anything for me? He's a liar. And a manipulator. Ginawa niya ang lahat ng ginawa niya, sinabi niya lahat ng sinabi niya dati dahil inutusan siya ng mga magulang niya. He didn't love me. He didn't have feelings for me. Bakit niya gugustuhin ang batang 'to? He could have a child with another!

"He's in love with you."

"What? You're crazy!"

Avo? In love with me? This must be the worst joke I had ever heard! Avo didn't have feelings. He didn't even have a heart! Kung nagawa niya akong paglaruan kahit wala akong alam sa mga kasalanan ng magulang ko sa kanya, kung nagawa niyang patayin si Oli kahit wala iyong ginagawa sa kanya, paano ako maniniwala na may kakayahan siyang magmahal?

"You're belittling your ability to make people fall for you, Belinda."

Chapitre Quarante Cinq

What Night said kept me up all night. Hindi ako naka-tulog kakaisip sa mga sinabi niya. And as I lie down, I could not help but to look at my stomach. This alien feeling inside me. Something was growing inside me... something I didn't want. Something given to me by someone I loathed the most.

Why was this happening to me? Bakit ngayon pa kung kailan malapit ko nang magawa ang matagal ko ng dapat ginawa?

"If... If I'll keep you, will you be a devil like your father?" I asked the thing growing inside me. "Or will you be a devil like me?"

I chuckled at the question. This baby had no choice. If what they say about the fruit not falling far from the tree, then this baby's option was only limited to being a baby devil. Parehong masama ang magulang niya.

"You don't have much choice, do you?" I said and then gently caressed my stomach.

I wanted to ponder upon everything Night but I also knew that I didn't need stress at this point. Kung tama ang sinabi ni Dr. Vargas, makakasama sa akin ang stress. But seriously, what she was asking was almost impossible. In this world I live in, was it really possible to live without the the constant threats? The killings? The blackmails?

A day wouldn't pass without stress infiltrating my system.

Maybe I should just be more careful... and let Night do my job for a while. Tutal ginagamit niya na naman ako, might as well use him for what he's good at.

As I was about to open the door, nagulat ako dahil si Night agad ang nakita ko. It seemed like he had been standing there for quite sometime bago ko pa man mabuksan ang pinto.

"What?" I asked.

"Do you want to eat?"

I nodded. "I'm famished."

He nodded, as well. "Alright, I'll cook. What do you want?"

Akma akong pabalik sa kwarto para kuhanin sana ang cellphone ko para tawagan si Dr. Vargas. I wasn't sure about this whole pregnancy thing. I wasn't sure what to eat, what to do. I didn't know a single thing. I just wanted to call her to ask about what food I should eat.

"Belinda."

Napatigil ako. Night's voice sounded so pained. What did I do again?

"What?"

He looked at me and then sighed. "Do you..." he trailed.

"Do I what?" I asked. I didn't even put an effort to continue what he was trying to say. With Night, it's almost impossible to tell what he's about to do next—much less to predict what he's thinking.

Alam ko na tinutulungan niya ako... and I knew he was doing it for a reason only known to him. But I never thought that he was using me... *and my baby.* Ni minsan, hindi ko naisip. And this was me and my body pero mas nauna pa niyang nalaman.

He's enigma personified. And I had long given up trying to interpret him.

"Don't do anything stupid," he said with a resigned voice.

"Ano ba sa tingin mo ang gagawin ko?" I asked him. "I won't abort the baby, if that's what you're concerned about."

Relief washed over his face. My lips parted.

"Did you actually think that I'm capable of killing my own child?"

He looked at me, his face unforgiving. "I've seen you do things you never thought you're capable of, Belinda. I've seen you kill innocent people, I've seen you mutilate those close to you. I've seen you do things without feeling remorse."

"I've seen the devil in you, Belinda. And I've seen how worse you can get once you let the monster take over."

Hindi ako nakasagot sa sinabi niya. I pursed my lips.

"So, tell me if killing a child is really out of your league," he continued.

"So, what if I kill this, Night? What is it really to you? Hindi ikaw ang may problema kay Avo. Hindi ikaw ang tatay ng batang 'to. Hindi ikaw ang magkakaroon ng problema kung gugustuhin kong patayin ang batang 'to."

He looked at me. I smirked at him.

"Do you, perhaps, love me, Night?"

I took a step closer. Just enough to be close but not enough to touch him. I didn't want to touch him. Because just a touch was enough to burn me.

"Do you want this child inside me to be yours?"

He kept silent.

"Because it's Avo's, Night. It's not yours. So, don't be too attached. Kung ano man ang plano ko, just stay out of it."

He stayed still. I had known him for so long and he always had something to say. Except for now.

"When I'm done with Avo, I'm also done with you. So don't, for a second, think that there's something between us. Because there's none. Naggagamitan lang tayo," I said and then touched his face. I caressed his cheek using my thumb. He had always been beautiful in my eyes. Unang beses na makita ko pa lang si Night, I knew he was special. And even when he was pretending to be an innocent sheep, I knew that a wolf was hiding beneath that exterior. He let Avo be feared when it was him who was needed to be feared.

He was a deceiver. And I didn't want to be deceived anymore.

He was the last person I wanted to fall in love with.

He was the last person I'd trust with my heart.

We were looking at each other, no one trying to break the contact. I didn't want to say anything for I knew that he would just use my words against me. This was Night. He was a master manipulator. And I learned that when it came to him, silence was the best answer.

Instead of trying to give him something to use against me, nagsimula akong maglakad papunta sa kainan. I could feel him following me.

Pagdating namin doon, agad siyang nagluto. I stayed sitted while waiting for the food to finish. I didn't know why he was so keen on cooking for me dahil mayroon namang pwedeng magluto para sa akin.

When he was done playing chef, inihanda niya ang pagkain sa harap ko. Most of them were vegetables and I didn't like vegetables.

"I know you don't like eating vegetables, but you should."

"I know."

Tahimik na nilagyan niya ang plato ko. I bit my lower lip. Should I apologize for what I said earlier even if I meant every word? I didn't want to be in love with him. I didn't want him to care this way for me.

I didn't want to be in love with anyone ever again. I tried once and it fucked me over. I didn't want to go through the same experience again.

Loving Avo scarred me. I didn't think I'd ever want to love again after him.

"Night," I called his name.

"Let's not talk about it," sagot niya na parang nabasa niya ang nasa isip ko.

I nodded in agreement. Tahimik kaming kumain. He kept on putting vegetables on my plate and even forced me to drink milk. Gusto kong matawa. I kill people for a living and mutilate people for fun... tapos umiinom ako ng gatas? Life was pretty ironic.

After we were done eating, I excused myself. Dumiretso ako sa kwarto para matulog. I deprived myself with sleep because I thought I

was slacking off. But knowing the reason behind my drowsiness these past few days, I decided to humor myself and to just give in and sleep. Pero bago pa man ako maka-tulog, mayroon akong napansin na nakapatong sa ibabaw ng kama ko.

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I reached for the piece of paper and read it. Agad na kumunot ang noo ko. Wala ito nang umalis ako, I was sure of it. And no one dares to come inside my room without my permission. Ang pinaka-ayaw ko sa lahat ay ang pinapakailaman ang gamit ko.

Agad akong lumabas at pumunta sa control room para tignan kung sino ang pangahas na sumuway sa utos ko. I was trying my best not to get mad because it would be bad for the baby.

"Someone barged inside my room. Look for the culprit," sabi ko roon kay Johann, the head of my security.

I stayed and watched as they reviewed the videos. Iyon mga mata ko ay napapatingin sa mga monitor kung saan nandoon si Night. He was doing nothing unusual... at kung meron man ay sigurado naman ako na ipaparating agad sa akin. Night knew that my house was heavily secured with cameras everywhere and my men checking every side of the house. At matalino si Night. Kung mayroon man siyang gagawin na kakaiba, alam ko na hindi niya iyon gagawin sa mismong bahay ko kung saan alam niya na makikita ko agad siya. And if he communicates in such a peculiar way, I was sure that he was doing his dirty deeds in such a way that only the dead would know.

Kung nagawan niya agad ng paraan para maitapon namin ang katawan ni Ella at Cathy sa loob ng ilang oras lamang, I wouldn't be surprised to learn more about the tricks he was keeping under his sleeves.

Night was one smart and dangerous guy, after all.

"Rewind it again," Johann said. "Fuck."

Nakuha niya ang atensyon ko nang magmura siya. Johann was a calm guy. He was used to wars and his reflex was no joke. Alam ko na seryoso ito kung nagawa niyang magmura.

"What?" I asked.

"Someone messed with the recordings," sabi niya. He asked the video to be rewinded. "If you look at this frame, the paper's not yet on the bed. And then a second later, it just magically appeared."

I fisted my hand. That bastard. Nagawa niyang makapasok sa bahay ko ng hindi ko alam!

"They must've erased the video and replaced it with a loop that's why we didn't notice."

My jaw was heavily clenched. "Find that bastard and bring him to me!" sigaw ko. Mabilis silang lumayas sa harapan ko. Biglang sumakit ang ulo ko dahil sa mga narinig ko. God! He had been back for not even a month yet pero nagawa niya na agad na pasukin ang lugar ko! I had people everywhere!

Biglang nanlaki ang mga mata ko at agad akong naglakad papunta sa kwarto ni Ayo. Naka-hinga lamang ako nang maluwag nang mapansin ko na nandoon pa rin sa harap ang mga nagbabantay.

"He's here."

Napatigil ako. He knew.

"He'll come and get me."

My jaw clenched.

"You'll be dead even before he gets you," I told Ayo.

"If he managed to come here right under your nose, he can pretty much do anything."

I took a step away from him. Hindi ako pwedeng magalit. Hindi ko maaaring patayin siya kahit na ang gustong gawin ng mga kamay ko ay ang pumaikot sa leeg niya hanggang sa magmakaawa siya na maka-hinga. I wanted him writhing in front of me, begging for his dear life.

"I'll give you a week, Ayo, and then I don't care about Avo or anything else. I will kill you."

I would rather kill Ayo now than to regret letting him live. Hindi ako papayag na makabalik siya sa mga magulang niya. I would never let them live happily while I was stuck without anyone with me.

Hindi maaari.

Minutes later and Johann said that Avo was not here anymore. I just asked him to leave my face because I might do something I'd regret later on. Mabuti na lang at wala si Night dahil hindi ko kayang makarinig ng kahit ano'ng paninisi.

I sat on the bed, holding the damned paper. I reached for my phone and dialed the number. It only took a ring before someone on the other line answered.

"Belinda."

I held my breath.

That voice.

That fucking man.

"Avo," I said, gritting my teeth. "You came in my house."

There was silence. I clutched the sheet in my hand.

"I needed to see if Ayo is still alive."

"He is."

"And without fingers, I see."

I clenched my jaw and tried to contain myself. "Your fault. I tried to warn you about my penchant for cutting things."

His arrogant face. He must be smirking right now.

"Yes, Belinda. I just learned about how you cut Ella and Cathy into pieces. A piece of art, I might say."

I didn't know what game he was playing, but I would play with him. Willingly, this time. Ilang beses na siyang nakipaglaro sa akin ng hindi ko alam na naglalaro na pala kami. I had always been at a disadvantage with his games. Now, I was holding all the aces.

"What do you want, Avo?"

"I want my brother back."

"Oh, I'll send you Ayo back."

Lifeless... and preferrably torn into pieces.

"And then I want the baby."

Natigilan ako sa sinabi niya. What the fuck did he just say? He wanted the baby? Nagpapatawa ba siya? Pagkatapos ng lahat ng nangyari, nakakaya niyang sabihin sa akin ito?!

"I want *my* baby, Belinda."

I wanted to say something, anything, but I couldn't find the right words to say. I wanted to shout at him for thinking that I would give him what he wanted just because he asked for it. Who did he think he was?! Did he think that I would just grant him anything he wanted simply because he asked?!

Sino ba siya sa tingin niya?!

"You don't have anything, Avo."

"That's my kid growing inside you."

"This is mine, not yours."

Silence enveloped us both and I was thankful that we were just talking on the phone. What would have happened if he was right in front of me? I would have crossed the distance and kill him! I would make him pay for everything he did to me. I would make him pay for playing me for a fool and making me suffer for the things I didn't do.

"The last time I checked, we both contributed, Belinda. Remember? Remember how I touched you? How I owned you?"

The way his voice sounded... I wanted to rip his tongue out of his mouth and make him stop.

"Remember the nights we spent together? And even the days?"

I clenched my fist.

"So, don't, for a second, think that that baby's yours alone. I'm the father, Belinda. And I came back to take what's mine."

"You don't have anything to take, Avo."

My breathing was ragged. My fist was clenched. My teeth were gritted.

God, he made me angry every time!

"I have everything to take, Belinda," he said, looking at me.

Hindi ko napigilan ang sarili ko. How dare he?! How dare he come here and say that he'd take everything back?! Na para bang pag-aari niya ako pagkatapos ng lahat ng ginawa niya sa akin!

"It's been months, Avo! Ilang buwan na 'yung lumipas! Don't you come here and say that you want me back!" I shouted at his face. My chest was heavy with anger. I thought I was numb, but here I was, feeling all the pain brought by him.

I trusted him. Despite all people telling me that he's dangerous, I still put my trust in him. Kasi sabi niya mahal niya ako... kasi sabi niya, ipagtatanggol niya ako.

Kasi sabi niya, mas mahalaga pa raw ako sa buhay niya. And being a fool, I believed him. I believed the liar and I got fooled. Maybe I deserved this. But it still hurt... It hurt being betrayed by the one whom you entrusted your life with.

"You don't want me. You want sex," I told him. Or maybe he wanted the power... or the satisfaction of seeing me being fooled by him.

He stared at me with those lonely pair of eyes.

"I don't need sex. Life fucks me everyday."

"Maybe that's good. It's the payment for making a fool out of me."

I saw pain shot through his eyes... but maybe it wasn't. Kasi bakit naman siya masasaktan?

"I didn't—fuck. Why don't you ever listen to me?"

"Because I fucking listened to you before! And look where it got me! You destroyed me! You fucking changed me!"

I wanted to cry. I wanted to turn back time. I wanted to stop myself from loving him, because all it did was to destroy every good fiber inside my body... until nothing good was left.

He took my humanity from me.

"I'm sorry," he said.

I looked at him, betrayed. He was the one who introduced me to pain. He's the one who acquianted me to anger. He was the one who made me cling on to revenge.

And sorry's all that he got?

"I don't need your sorry," I replied as I stared into his eyes—those eyes I once trusted. Those eyes who lied. "Your sorry won't take away the pain you gave me."

I pointed the gun at his head. It was so easy to end this now... To make all the pain and hurting go away. But was he worth it? Was he still worth all the pain and suffering?

"You told me you'd protect me... but you were the one who made me pull the trigger."

Chapitre Quarante Six

After talking to Avo, hindi na ako natahimik. What did he want? This baby? Talaga bang inisip niya na ibibigay ko ito sa kanya dahil lang gusto niya? Did he think I would do anything he asked me to? That I would give him everything after all that he did to me?

He's fucking unbelievable!

At nang dumating si Night, hindi ko sinabi sa kanya na nakausap ko si Avo. I wanted to fix this myself. Nagawa na ni Night ang trabaho niya. He managed to get Avo back. Now, everything's up to me.

"Are you fine?" Night asked. He just returned from a meeting and he just learned about what transpired earlier. I asked Johann not to tell Night while he was out working dahil alam ko na agad siyang didiretso rito. He was just informed about what happened when he came back.

And now, he's in front of me, looking worried, but again, it might be just me. I didn't want to assume when it came to what Night was feeling or thinking.

"I'm fine," I replied, trying to fake calmness.

"Johann said there's a number."

I nodded and gave it to him. It was crumpled... almost torn. Talking to Avo really angered me. I just calmed down because I reminded myself that heightened emotion was not good for the baby.

"Did you call?"

I shook my head.

"Why?" he asked.

I looked at him with my glassy eyes. "I don't know."

Night didn't say anything. Instead, he reached for my phone and dialed it. He didn't have a phone—or maybe he did but I threw it away. I didn't want him talking to anyone. I didn't want to make room for any more deception. I had enough.

I watched him as he waited for the call to be answered. Biglang kumunot ang noo niya.

"The number's incorrect," he said.

"Maybe there's a code," I replied.

Avo was smart, after all. Pagkatapos naming mag-usap ay itinapon niya na. He definitely didn't want to be tracked. He told me he'd see me and I knew he'd see me. Kung nagawa niyang pasukin ang bahay ko habang nandito lahat ng mga binayaran ko para bantayan ako, alam ko na madali lang sa kanya para makita ako.

And I didn't know if I was waiting or dreading for that day to come.

Night was still looking at me. Maybe he read between my lies. Maybe he knew I called. Maybe he just didn't want to say anything.

Ewan.

Magulo ang utak ko.

Days passed. I was only starting to notice that my stomach was growing. It was still small, but I could definitely notice the bump. I didn't know what to feel. Avo wanted this baby so much that he decided to come home. Ni hindi niya nagawang bumalik sa Pilipinas kahit na pinadala ko sa kanya ang mga daliri ng kapatid niya. But just a news about this unborn baby was enough to make him come running back.

"Your daddy will never have you," I whispered. "We'll both die before

he gets you from me," I promised.

Maybe it was wrong but I didn't want my child to grow with Avo. He's heartless... and if he takes my child from me, mas ayoko na lumaki siya bilang isang *Ostenhaimer*. That family took my family from me. I would never allow my child to be associated with that name.

I would choose death over that.

Habang abala si Night sa pag-asikaso sa mga dapat ay trabaho ko, naghanda na ako. I didn't know when or where Avo would choose to grace me with his utmost respected presence, so I deemed that it was better to be prepared. Mas maayos na ito kaysa mabigla na naman ako sa pagdating niya.

I wanted him to see the difference in me.

Na hindi na ako iyong babae na pinaglaruan niya.

Na malayo na ako sa babae na pinagmukha niyang tanga.

I went to the shooting range and practiced shooting. It had been long since I did this. Tuwing pupunta ako rito, naaalala ko si Avo. He was the one who taught me how to shoot... he taught me so much. He made me hate so many things.

I didn't stop until I was tired. I wanted to be prepared. I wanted to be the one to pull the trigger.

I didn't want to be a *hypocrite* once again. This time, I would do the dirty work.

Ibababa ko na sana ang baril nang may maramdaman akong gumalaw sa likuran ko. Nahigit ko ang hininga ko. I held on to the gun.

"Avo," I said. It could only be him. Siya lang ang may kakayanan na iparamdam sa akin ito.

I heard footsteps coming nearer. Mas lalong humihirap ang paghinga kapag nararamdaman ko na mas malapit na siya sa akin.

And when the footsteps stopped, my heart was already racing inside my chest. I could feel him near me. He was here.

"Belinda."

Mas lalo kong nahigit ang hininga ko.

He was really here.

"It had been so long, wife. Turn around and let me see your face."

Wife.

That fucking word.

I hated being called that by him.

Pinapaalala niya lahat ng kasinungalingan na sinabi niya sa akin. How he played me. How he made me believe that he loved me. How he promised me he'd protect me.

All the lies he fed me. Isang salita lang, bumabalik lahat ng ala-ala sa akin. He's making it harder to live again.

My lips were quivering. My mind was in a haywire. I didn't know what he wanted to do.

"I have a gun."

"I can see that," he said, his voice had a hint of amusement. "You're a better shooter now, wife."

I turned around and pointed the gun at him. "Stop calling me that!"

Pero hindi siya natinag. Instead, he took a step closer. My hands were shaking but I remained calm. I only needed to pull the trigger. I only needed to do that to end all of this.

"Would you rather I call you love?"

"You bastard!"

He took another step.

"Stop!" I warned him. "Don't come near me!"

There was that amused expression on his face. He was making me want to make his head explode!

"Wife, if you're as smart as you claim, you'd know that you're holding a gun with no bullets."

Lumapit siya. He's right in front of me. God.

Kinuha niya ang kamay ko at saka itinapat ang baril sa noo niya.

"Go on, shoot me," he said with his hand holding mine. "If that will make the pain go away, shoot away, wife."

My hands were shaking. My lips were quivering. I could feel water

forming in my eyes.

"Just as I thought, you're still my Belinda."

Binitiwan niya ang kamay ko at humakbang ng isa palayo sa akin.

"You're all words and no actions, wife. And here, I thought you've changed."

Agad kong binitiwan ang hawak kong baril at mabilis na kinuha ang baril na palaging pinapaalala ni Night na dalhin ko. He had always reminded me to carry a gun for protection. He'd strap it on my back. He'd nag me to carry a gun even though I didn't think it was necessary for I was always surrounded by my people.

I didn't think this would one day save me.

I pulled off the safety.

"This one has bullets, Avo. Don't try me."

He was looking at me.

"Shoot me."

"I will."

We stared at each other, none of us moving. I didn't know where my people were. Did he kill them? All of them? Nagawa niyang patayin lahat ng mga tauhan ko ng hindi ko man lang nalalaman?

"What do you want, Avo?"

He stared. Those eyes. Those fucking, lying eyes.

"I want my brother."

"I'll send his body to you once I'm done."

He clenched his jaw. "You won't do that, wife."

"Then prepare to be surprised, Avo," I said. The way he's making me feel right now, I wouldn't be surprised if Ayo would be at the receiving end of my wrath. I promised Ayo that I would only give him a week to live and time was seriously ticking for him.

I intended to keep my word.

By the end of this week, he'd be long gone from this world.

"You give Ayo back to me..." he said, each word sending chills up my spine. But I didn't show it. I didn't want him to see how his mere words

were affecting me. "And then give me my son."

Hindi ko alam kung matatawa ba ako sa sinasabi niya. He was asking me as if I was at his mercy.

"Your son?"

He didn't say a word. He just looked.

"Is this really important to you?" I asked, pointing the gun at my stomach. I saw fear cross his eyes. He *really* wanted this baby.

"Then, should I just send you the corpse of this baby, Avo?" I asked, still pointing the gun. I saw how he clenched his jaw. Avo had always been in control of his emotions. He never let me see anything. He always kept me at a distance.

He always hid me in the dark... until now.

He wanted this baby.

Tama si Night.

"Will you do me a favor, Avo?"

He was looking at me, waiting for what I had to say. Lihim akong napa-ngiti. I had him around my fingers.

"If you really want this baby, give me what I want."

"What do you want?"

"Your parents."

He didn't say a word.

"I want you to bring me your parents."

"That's impossible."

"Then make it possible," I replied. "If you really want this baby, give me what I want."

Hindi pa rin siya sumagot. I didn't think he was taking me seriously.

"I don't know what is with this baby that you desperately want, Avo. But I know for sure that you're desperate enough to do anything to have it," I said, smiling. If he didn't come home, I would have probably already aborted the baby. And Avo knew me... alam niya na iyon ang una kong gagawin kapag nalaman ko na buntis ako. He knew how much I hated him. He knew how much I'd hate this part of him growing inside me.

Alam niya na kung hindi siya uuwi para pigilan ako o para bigyan ako ng rason para hindi ito patayin, malamang ay matagal na itong wala sa mundo.

Because the last thing I needed would be a reminder of everything I wanted to forget.

"Trust me, I'll kill this even before you can see *him* take his first breath."

He slowly shook his head.

"You wouldn't," he said, his voice unbelieving.

He wouldn't get hurt if I shoot him.

He wouldn't even be hurt even if I kill Ayo in front of him.

So instead, I shot myself.

Napaupo ako sa sakit. I could feel the blood flowing down. I could feel my flesh being torn by the bullet.

And I could see the fear in Avo's eyes.

He didn't think I'd do it, but I would.

Kung ito ang paraan para masaktan siya, gagawin ko. Paulit-ulit.

I looked at him while still holding the gun.

"Next time, it will be my stomach, Avo," I said while he was looking at my bleeding leg with his widened eyes. "I don't care if I die... basta masaktan lang kita."

Chapitre Quarante Sept

I had to restrain myself from killing the people after I found them all on the ground, asleep. No wonder madali lang para kay Avo na pasukin ako dahil ang tatanga ng mga tao sa paligid ko! I was never safe with these idiots around me!

"Don't," I grunted when they tried to help me. I was limping and I felt like I was losing blood. Fast. "Call Dr. Vargas and prepare blood."

I didn't know what happened next.

All I could remember was praying that the child inside me was fine.

I'm sorry. I had to do it. I had to show Avo that I was serious. That I would not even hesitate to kill myself if it meant hurting him the same way he hurt me.

At kung ito lamang ang paraan para makuha ko ang gusto ko, hindi ako magdadalawang isip na patayin kung sinuman ang dapat kong patayin.

Hours. Or maybe a day. Hindi ko alam kung gaano ako katagal na natulog. My body felt like I had been punched all over. Hindi ako makagalaw nang maayos.

When I opened my eyes, agad kong nakita si Night. He was hovering.

"Boe!" he exclaimed and then I felt his hands on mine. "Are you alright?"

I nodded although my whole body ached. I didn't want to look like I regretted my decision. Because if I should, I would. Without hesitation.

Sinubukan kong tumayo ngunit hindi ko nagawa.

"Night..." I croaked. "Water."

My mouth felt dry. I felt so tired.

"Thank you," I said matapos kong mainom ang binigay niya. He was looking at me and I knew he wanted to ask me questions. Siguro nga pareho kami. We both wanted to know much, but we're both afraid to ask. Dahil kilala namin ang isa't-isa. We both couldn't help satisfy each other's quench from truth.

Because at the end of it all, we're all playing for ourselves alone. Walang pinagkakatiwalaan.

"Is my... baby okay?" I managed to ask.

"That's stupid," he said.

I gave him a small smile. "It's not."

"You could've killed yourself!" galit na sabi niya.

"But I'm still alive, am I not? And besides, I just shot my leg, Night. Alam ko na hindi ako mamamatay doon."

By the way he was looking at me, I could clearly see the frustration. Na kung maaaring lang, sasakalin niya ako sa sobrang inis.

"I should really always stay with you," madiin niyang sabi.

"And what? Be my babysitter?"

He glared at me. "You think this is funny?"

I shook my head. "It's not, but you're acting funny, Night." I smiled at him and then caressed my stomach. Agad na napa-tingin doon si Night. "I've thought about what you said."

"And shooting yourself was your response?"

I just realized that when he's annoyed, his wit leaves him. Napailing na lang ako sa kanya.

"No, idiot," I said and then he glared some more. I always knew that Night's a smart person and though he didn't mean it, he always made me

feel stupid because of the decisions I tend to make. But last night wasn't one of the stupid decisions I make. It was smart. Brilliant, even. Because of this child growing inside me, I got to control Avo. I got to make him do whatever it was that I wanted.

"I just realized that you're right. This baby inside me is what Avo wants. He *desperately* wants it for whatever reason," I said. "And when I told him that I'd give him this baby's corpse if he didn't heed my request, he thought I was bluffing." I looked at him. "And I don't bluff. Not anymore."

I knew shooting myself would hurt but I was prepared for the pain. What was pain for the glory? It was but a little price to pay.

"So, I shot myself to show him that I was serious."

Naka-tingin siya sa akin na parang hindi maka- paniwala sa mga naririnig niya. Did he think having this baby would miraculously give me a heart? And if he did, he must really not know me at all.

"You'll kill your own child?"

I looked at him.

"You tell me."

He brushed his hair with his fingers while not even trying to hide the fact that he was disappointed with my decision.

"I knew you were crazy, but God, Belinda! This is insane! That's your child we're talking about!"

I gritted my teeth. "Who are you to judge, Night? Since when did you have a heart?"

"That's beside the point, Belinda! That's your child! That's where you draw the line!"

Natawa ako sa kanya. "Line, Night? Don't talk to me about lines because when they murdered my whole family, they already crossed that fucking line!" sigaw kong pabalik sa kanya.

Did I need to remind him of everything the *Ostenhaimers* took away from me?! How my brother Oli was killed?! How my parents were murdered in cold blood?! How I was made a fool for not even knowing?!

Kung paano na hanggang ngayon, ni wala akong bangkay na mapaglamayan?!

I had all the reasons to cross that fucking line!

My chest was heaving in anger.

Mabilis akong tumayo pero hinawakan ako ni Night. "Don't touch me," I whispered.

"Boe..."

Tinignan ko siya nang masama. "Boe is dead, Night. Pinatay niyo na siya." At mabilis ko siyang tinalikuran.

I still had people to kill.

And if he's weak enough to do the killing, then I might as well do it myself. After all, this was my fight.

I was still too weak and I couldn't walk. But this wouldn't stop me from doing what I wanted to do. No way in hell I'd let anything stop me. Let alone anyone. Kung ayaw ni Night, wala akong pakielam. Basta 'wag siyang humarang sa dadaanan ko.

They were about to say something, but I didn't want to listen to another apology. Tapos na. Nangyari na.

"Prepare a place," I said to Angela. "Make sure it's safe and soundproof. Also, bring my tools." Tinignan ko si Johann. "Track Avo and then tell me his whereabouts."

After telling them their assignments, I dismissed them. Nanatili akong nakakulong sa kwarto dahil hindi ako makapaglakad nang maayos. They got me a wheelchair but I didn't feel like using it.

And besides, I was conserving all my energy. Alam ko na malapit ko ng magawa lahat ng dapat kong gawin. That finally, I would get my justice.

Johann said that Avo was last seen heading to the airport. Lihim akong napa-ngiti. Ginawa nga niya ang gusto kong gawin. And he should. Dahil

hindi ako nagbibiro sa mga sinabi ko sa kanya. I'd rather die than let him have the thing that he wanted the most.

Habang hinihintay ko ang mga susunod na mangyayari, nagpahinga na muna ako. Dr. Vargas said that I should take ample of rest dahil na-stress daw ang baby ko sa mga nangyari sa akin. So, for a few days, I had been on bed.

"What brings you here?" I asked Lorenzo. He was holding a basket of fruits. So weird.

"I heard you shot yourself."

I shrugged. "Nothing new. Everyone gets shot everyday."

Umupo siya sa couch. I looked at him.

"What really is it that you want, Lorenzo?" I asked. He was the kind of person who would never do anything if it would not benefit him. He's a Utilitarian, as he would always say. If something had no use, he'd be quick to discard it.

"The end's about to come. I want to see it."

Kumunot ang noo ko. "What?"

"I know about your plans, Estrella. And I want to see you do it."

"You want to see me kill people?" I asked and he nodded. "Just when I though you can't get any weirder."

He crossed his legs. "When are you planning to do it?"

I shrugged. "I don't know. I still don't know if Avo's already in France... or if he'll follow what I asked of him."

"And you asked him to?"

"Bring me his parents. I want to kill them myself."

"That's a hard plan to follow, Estrella," Lorenzo said.

Agad na kumunot ang noo ko. "What do you mean?"

"It will be hard to take them out of France, much less bring to the Philippines," he said.

"Then, should I go to France?" I asked, though I highly doubted it. I couldn't even walk; I was limping. And I wasn't stupid to go to the enemy's territory. I was well-aware of the fact that France was under the

control of the *Ostenhaimers*. Going there would be no better than killing myself.

Lorenzo shook his head. "No," he said and there was the twinkle in his eyes. I knew he was planning something devious. And he was good at doing the devious. When we killed his parents, he skinned them alive—as a payment for always getting under his skin, he said.

I saw how his parents begged for him to stop. How he began from the arms hanggang mapunta sa katawan. I could still clearly remember the look of their flesh right in front of my eyes. It was the first time I had seen flesh—fresh flesh. And blood. Lots of it. Lorenzo didn't stop until he drained the last drop.

Hindi ko alam kung ano ang ginawa ng mga magulang niya para magalit siya nang ganoon.

"Lorenzo, stop!" his mother shouted.

But he didn't. He continued to slice the skin off her flesh. Tumalsik ang dugo sa mukha niya pero wala siyang pakielam. Like a butcher, he continued what he was doing. He pinched the skin and cut it off with a knife. Patuloy siya sa ginagawa niya hanggang sa matanggalan niya ng balat ang buong braso.

"You monster! Stop hurting your mother!" sigaw ng tatay niya. But he couldn't do anything. He was tied up.

Lorenzo's bloody face was smiling. I had known him for a while. I knew he was crazy but this was another level of crazy.

"Why do you care? You always beat her up, father. You should be thanking me instead."

I felt chills running up my spine.

His mother was passed out. She probably couldn't handle the pain any longer.

Naupo si Lorenzo sa harap at patuloy ang ginagawa, while the sound of jazz was playing. He was humming while skinning his mother alive. Nang matapos siya sa kabilang braso, sinimulan niyang tanggalan ng balat ang binti. Blood was seeping everywhere.

And I didn't know why I watched.

Maybe to know that I wasn't the worst.

That I wasn't the only one with a loose screw.

"Lorenzo..." his father cried. "I beg of you. Stop this..."

Still holding the bloody knife, he looked at him and smiled.

"Do you want to be next, father?" Lorenzo asked. His father paled. "I knew it. You're a coward. You only beat mother because she won't fight."

He pulled his mother's tongue and cut it. I held my breath. I forced myself not to puke at the sight of it.

"I better cut this off. She wasn't using it, anyway," sabi niya habang patuloy na hinihiwa ang dila ng nanay niya mula sa kanyang bibig.

He threw the tongue away. I closed my eyes at what he did next.

If I knew how to hold a grudge, Lorenzo knew better. And he collected debts with interest.

And I was thankful that he didn't hold a grudge against me. I shot his parents. I couldn't stomach what he was doing anymore. Sobra na ang ginawa niya. Whatever they did to him, it already had been paid.

I just wanted him to stop. He scared me.

But right now, I needed him to scare me. I wanted to release the monster in him to help me.

I wanted to be creative with Avo and his parents.

"How badly do you want to hurt them?"

I looked at him. "Very badly," I replied.

I wanted them to bleed. I wanted them to beg. I wanted them at my mercy. I wanted them to feel everything they made me feel. I wanted them desperate to die because they couldn't do it anymore.

He smiled. "Good. Then listen to my plans."

I didn't know how Lorenzo did it but he managed to get a message to Avo. It was a Friday and everything's ready. Hindi ko mapigilan ang mga ngiti sa labi ko. I had waited for this day to come... and it's finally here.

"Any last words?" I asked Ayo. I was in his room. "Or last meal, perhaps? I'm feeling generous today, Ayo."

He glared at me.

"I'm serious this time, Ayo. You will die."

Hindi pa rin siya nagsalita. I shrugged.

"If you don't want to eat with me around, iiwan muna kita para kumain."

Lumabas ako at dumiretso para kumain. I woke up early for this. Too early, in fact. Halos hindi ako naka-tulog dahil sa pagka-sabik sa mga mangyayari ngayong araw. Lorenzo said that Avo would comply. Naayos na rin ang lugar na gagamitin.

And I was wearing white. I wanted Avo to see me soaking in blood. That would be my gift to him.

"Why the sad face, Night?" I asked. I was spreading butter on my bread. Naka-tingin lang sa akin si Night. "Do you have problems with my plans?"

He shook his head.

"Then why the long face?"

Tinignan niya ako.

"What will you do after this?" he asked.

"What do you mean?"

"You let your life revolve around this, Boe. You live to extract your revenge. What will happen after this? After you kill Avo's parents?"

I looked at him.

"I'll live happily ever after."

"What about Avo?"

I creased my forehead. "What about him?"

"Will you let him back in your life once he does what you asked him to?"

Ibinaba ko iyong tinapay ko. "You just ruined my appetite, Night."

Tumayo ako at nagsimulang maglakad palayo. But his words followed me. His questions haunted me.

"Will you accept him again?"

I looked at him and shook my head.

"Why will I accept the person who made me see the worst in everything?"

Iniwan ko siya at pinuntahan si Angela. Everything was set. Sinigurado ko na lahat ng magbabantay ay hindi tatanga-tanga kagaya ng mga nagbantay sa akin. I couldn't afford to risk today.

I had been waiting far too long for today.

Nang masigurado ko na nasa warehouse na si Ayo, nagsimula na akong maghanda.

"Are you coming?" I asked Night.

"Do you want me to?" he shot back.

I sharpened my knife and then looked at him. "You taught me how to do this, Night... so watch me do it on my own."

I would never stop until I was satisfied. I would never stop until his heart was still beating. And even then, it wouldn't be payment enough for everything they took from me.

Days passed. I was given the go signal. Isang beses, nakausap ko si Avo. He had his way to reach me kahit na ako, hindi ko alam kung paano ko siya makakausap.

"If I do this, will you—"

I cut him off. "Do it first, then we'll talk."

I didn't believe it at first. Hindi ko akalain na talagang babalik siya sa France para gawin ang gusto ko. But he was there.

And he was ready to do whatever it was that I asked of him.

And now, the cameras were set. The screen was set. It was as huge as the ones found in cinemas. If it only wasn't too much, I'd ask Angela to prepare popcorn and drinks. After all, some people went here to watch the spectacle that was the downfall of the *Ostenhaimers.*

I wouldn't be able to blame them for wanting to be a part of this special day. Because even I, I dreamed about this.

"Good evening," I said to Night and Lorenzo. There was a couch in the warehouse. I made Angela bring a couch because I wanted Night and Lorenzo to be relaxed while watching me do what I had long dreamed of doing.

"Where's Ayo?" Lorenzo asked.

"He's being prepared," I answered. "Care for a cup of coffee?"

Night was looking at me but I decided not to mind him. I didn't need his negativity. This night was my night. All the nights prepared me for this night. Hindi ko hahayaan na sirain niya ang gabing pinaka-hihintay ko.

Lorenzo stood up and got himself a glass of whiskey. I didn't drink but a gulp would probably help me.

"What's this?" I asked him when he handed me a phone.

"I gave Avo a phone. You can use that to call him."

I looked at him. "Why are you doing this?" I asked. Why was he going through all the trouble?

"It's entertaining," he just said and then smiled at me. "Make us proud, Estrella."

Hindi na ako naupo pa sa tabi nila Night habang naghihintay. I was fidgeting. Itim lamang ang nakalagay sa screen. Any minute now, there would be a live feed straight from France.

"What do you want me to do?" I asked Lorenzo. I was devious but Lorenzo's creativity was on a whole new level. I could still clearly remember what he did to his own parents. At kung nakaya niyang gawin iyon sa sarili niyang mga magulang, alam ko na mas dapat kong katakutan ang kaya niyang gawin sa ibang tao.

"It's stupid to go to France and it's more stupid to think that Avo can bring his parents here," he said. "Ostenhaimers have people loyal to them so I highly doubt if you can take them here."

"So, what's the plan?"

I was all ears. Even though I wanted to spearhead this operation, I knew I should consider Lorenzo's thoughts.

He looked at me with a glimmer in his eyes. "You kill Ayo... and Avo will kill his parents."

Biglang lumakas ang tibok ng puso ko. Excitement washed over my entire system.

"What?"

"We can set-up a camera. You will kill Ayo here—do whatever you please. Make his parents watch. Make them watch as you kill their favorite son."

Kumunot ang noo ko.

"Ayo's the favorite son?"

Lorenzo nodded. "That's why they killed your parents. They took their favorite son away."

Mas lalong kumuyom ang kamao ko nang marinig ko kung paano nila pinatay ang mga magulang ko. How could they do that? Avo killed Oli! Of course, my parents would want retribution! Tapos papatayin nila?!

"And when they learned that he's still alive, they send Avo to lure you and get from you the information about Ayo's whereabouts."

My jaw was heavily clenched. Those devils. Magbabayad sila sa ginawa nila.

"Imagine the pain you will cause them if they see their son being killed... slowly... painfully."

Lorenzo looked at me.

"You may not be able to touch them, but you can still inflict pain, Estrella."

Tinignan ko siya.

"And what about Avo?" I asked.

He smiled. "After killing Ayo, make Avo kill his parents."

"Paano ako makakasiguro na susunod siya?"

He looked at me and then down to my stomach. "You have what he wants."

Napahawak ako sa tiyan ko. "Why does he want this so much?" He could have a child with anyone. He's a Dieux. Anyone would want to be with him and bear an heir for the Ostenhaimers.

I didn't know and didn't understand his desperation for my child.

Lorenzo shrugged. "Who knows?"

At ngayon, nangyayari na ang lahat ng dapat mangyari. Sinabi ko kay Angela na dalhin na dito si Ayo. He was dressed in white, like what I requested. I just wanted the blood to be very visible. Sayang naman kung hindi makikita kapag ibang kulay ang suot niya.

Ayo was positioned in front of the camera. His hands were not even tied. What could he even do, really? All his fingers were cut off. He couldn't even hold a knife to save his life.

"Are you ready, Ayo?" I asked him with a sweet smile on my face.

"Burn in hell, Estrella," he spat out.

"Oh, I'll see you there soon, Ayo. But for now, you go first."

And then the camera went live.

Chapitre Quarante Huit

"Ayo!" The *Ostenhaimer's* main bitch shouted. Both of Avo's parents were tied. Like I asked him to. Napa-ngiti ako dahil talagang sinunod niya ang mga gusto kong mangyari.

Ayo's face widened in fear. Mas lalo akong napa-ngiti. Hindi niya akalain na kaya ko... pero nakaya ko. I got them. I got all of them.

"Are you alright?" the main bitch asked. Her hair was in disarray. She probably fought against her son. Good. Mas gusto ko na malaman niya kung paano siya pinagpalit ng anak niya para sa akin.

The feeling of betrayal... it's the worst. Because betrayal always comes from the people you trust.

"Mom..." Ayo croaked. "Why..."

Mayroong tumulong luha mula sa mga mata niya. Crocodile tears. Nakakaramdam pa ba ng sakit ang demonyong tulad niya?

My parents probably cried, too. They probably begged for their lives, too. Kaya bakit ako maaawa sa kanila?

At kung nagtagumpay si Avo sa plano niyang paglaruan at paikutin ako, sigurado ako na papatayin din nila ako. I was merely doing the thing that they would've done to me. Paanong ako ang naging masama?

They said kindness is the solution for everything... well, they're not living in my world. And here, violence answers everything.

"It's going to be fine," the main bitch said. Gusto kong matawa. Fine? Sa tingin ba nila magiging maayos pa sila kapag natapos ako sa kanila? I would see to it that they'd be unrecognizable when I'm done with them.

I would mutilate them.

I would dismember them.

I would deface them beyond recognition.

"...Avo?" Ayo said, his voice shaking. "How can you do this?"

Avo couldn't even look him in the eye. This was such a happy occasion.

"You betrayed our family for this devil!" Ayo shouted.

I stayed back. I let them have their family reunion. Gusto ko sanang maupo kasama sina Night at Lorenzo pero kung mayroon na namang kakaiba sa ekspresyon ni Night, ayokong makita iyon. This night was far too perfect to be marred.

"Alistair."

I didn't know how the old man did it but his mere voice commanded attention. Napa-tigil si Ayo sa paninisi sa demonyo niyang kapatid. Maging ako ay napa-tingin agad.

"Stop crying. *Ostenhaimers* don't cry."

Gusto kong matawa. This old man.

"If we're going to die, then so be it. But we will never beg. Not even for our lives."

Napailing na lang ako. Naglakad ako hanggang nakikita na rin ako sa harap ng camera. I looked nice. In fact, I was wearing a white dress.

"Good evening," I greeted. "Avo," I smiled. "I see that you followed through."

He was looking at me but that anger in his eyes was very visible that it was almost palpable.

"What did you have to control my son?!" the main bitch said.

I held on to my stomach. "I'm carrying his son."

Nanlaki ang mga mata niya. "You impregnated that devil, Augustus?!" sigaw ng ina niya. She must have hated this so much.

"Don't worry, I don't want this, as well. I'll make sure that my child will carry my name, not yours," sabi ko ng naka-ngiti. "After all, after this night, the *Ostenhaimers* will finally have their downfall."

Sumisigaw pa ang ina nila nang kuhanin ko ang mga gagamitin ko. I went to the table where all my tools were laid. I reached for my knife. It was a shame that Night threw the knife we used to dismember Ella and Cathy. That would have been perfect for this night...

Hawak ko na iyong kutsilyo nang lumapit ako pabalik kay Ayo.

"I would love to begin with his fingers but I remembered that I already cut all his fingers," I said, smiling. "Did you love my gifts? I was the one who personally put them in a box."

The main bitch's face was contorted in anger. Even the old man was obviously trying to control his anger. But both were failing. Miserably.

"I don't want to surprise you so head's up... I'm going to kill your son," sabi ko at saka itinarak sa tiyan ni Ayo ang hawak kong kutsilyo. "This is for Oli!" I said and then on his chest. "This one is for my mother!" And then on his neck. "This one is for my father!"

And then I stabbed his heart.

"And this one is for me."

Patuloy ko siyang sinaksak hanggang sa magsuka siya ng dugo. Hindi ako tumigil. Hindi ko kayang tumigil. Habang sumisigaw ang mga magulang nila ay mas lalo akong nagkakaroon ng dahilan para saksakin si Ayo.

I was bathing in his blood but I didn't care. I continued stabbing him until he wasn't breathing anymore. Until his lifeless body was covered in blood.

My face was covered in blood. I looked at the screen.

"How does it feel? How does it feel to lose someone?!" sigaw ko.

"You devil!"

"Devil?! I'll show you who's the devil!"

I reached for my knife and carved out Ayo's chest. The blood leaked everywhere. Hindi ako tumigil hanggang sa makuha ko ang puso niya. I

cut through his ribs and looked for his heart. I took it out and held it in my hands.

It wasn't bleeding anymore.

Ayo was dead.

He finally was dead. Kagaya ng kapatid ko.

"This is what you took from me. You took away my family! You took away my heart!"

Mabilis kong itinapon ang hawak kong puso. I carved his stomach until I found his intestines. Mabilis kong hinatak iyon. Hindi ako tumigil. Inilabas ko lahat ng pwede kong ilabas. I wanted him to be empty... like how empty I felt when I learned that my whole family was already dead.

I just wanted them to feel what they made me feel.

Was that so bad?

"Stop!" she shouted. But I didn't. Patuloy kong hinatak ang bituka ni Ayo hanggang sa mailabas ko ang lahat. "Stop..."

She was crying. She was breaking down. Gaano kasakit na makita ang anak mo na patay na? Gaano kasakit na makita ang anak mo na binababoy?

Umiling ako. I reached for my butcher's knife and began cutting.

"I didn't have my parents' body. I couldn't even properly mourn," I said and then began cutting Ayo's limbs. I began with his arms and cut through the joint. There was a bloodbath.

This was easier than what I did with Cathy. My knife was meant to cut.

"Where did you put their bodies, huh?" I said and then cut through the shoulders. "Did you feed them to your pets?!" I shouted and then cut through his neck. Biglang gumulong palayo ang ulo ni Ayo. His eyes were still open.

I was able to fulfill my wish.

I wished to be the last person he sees.

And I was. Ako ang huli niyang nakita bago siya namatay.

"Because I will do the same."

I cut through his ribs and chopped his body into pieces.

"I will dismember your favorite son and feed him to my dogs. I will see to it that every piece of him will be gone... because that's what he deserves. He deserves to be gone like that. To be disposed the same way you disposed my parents!"

I tore him limbs from limbs. I cut through his joints. I didn't stop until he was beyond recognition. Hanggang sa ang matira na lang sa kanya ay mga parte na hindi na makikilala.

"Bring my dogs in," I said.

Dinala nila ang mga aso ko. There were five. Iniabot sa akin ang lalagyan ng kainan nila. Inilagay ko roon ang pira-pirasong katawan ni Ayo.

"Look at him!" I commanded. "Make them watch!" sigaw ko kay Avo. Mayroong dalawang lalaki na lumapit at pilit na pinanood ang mga magulang nila sa ginagawa ko. Ayo's arms were in the plate. "Watch as my dogs feast on your boy, Mrs. Ostenhaimer!"

My dogs howled when they were given their food. They devoured Ayo's body. Tahimik akong nanonood habang kinakain nila ang bawat piraso ng katawa ni Ayo.

My eyes suddenly darted. Lorenzo was drinking his whiskey and was obviously pleased at what he was watching. I looked for Night but he wasn't here. Where was he? Why wasn't he watching me deliver my promises?

When my dogs were done, ibinalik ko ang tingin.

"Avo," I called. "Begin with your father."

She shouted. This must've hurt so bad. Seeing your son die... and then your husband. If only I didn't promise Avo that he'll see his child, I would have asked him to kill himself along with his family.

"Augustus, no!" she shouted. But it was too late. Pinasabog na ni Ayo ang ulo ng tatay niya.

A small smile appeared on my face. This was too easy but I still wasn't done.

"And now, I want you to dismember your father, Avo... Like what I did to your brother."

Avo looked at me with such hatred. But I knew he would follow. He had already come this far, ngayon pa ba siya titigil?

"No, Augustus! Don't do this to your father!" she shouted and shouted but she wasn't heard. Inabot ni Avo ang malaking kutsilyo at sinimulang pagpira-pirasuhin ang ama niya. He cut the wrist and then through his arms. I could see blood spattered on his face but he remained stoic.

What was he feeling? Was he feeling regret? Was he feeling anger?

I wanted to know what he felt.

I wanted to know if he was as miserable as I.

"Cut his head," I commanded. And in one swift motion, his father's head was removed from his body. Napa-ngiti ako. "Good. And now, put it in front of your mother."

Sinunod niya ang gusto kong mangyari at inilagay iyon sa harap. His mother was crying and crying. She was so weak.

"Good, Avo. Continue with what you're doing," I said but he didn't move. I clenched my jaw and held on to my stomach. "Continue," I repeated through gritted teeth.

Napa-tingin si Avo sa tiyan ko. And then he proceeded. He really loved this baby inside me. Lihim akong napa-ngiti. Fucking Avo was probably the best thing I did. Because of it, I got him wrapped around my bloody finger.

And so I watched.

I watched as he tore his father from limb to limb. Kung paano niya pinagpira-piraso ang sarili niyang ama sa harap ng walang kwenta niyang ina.

And when he was finally done, he was looking at me. He was as bloody as I.

"Now... let's get creative with your mother."

I would've killed her quickly like what I did with her husband. But after learning that it was her idea to capture my parents and torture them? It would be a miracle if I'd let her die easily.

"I did a thorough research about you, Mrs. Ostenhaimer. You have fear of enclosed space, is that right?"

Nanlaki ang mga mata niya. I was prepared. I prepared for this.

Ipinasok ang kabaong na pinabili ko pa para sa okasyon na ito.

"No," sabi niya habang patuloy na umiiling. "You wouldn't do this to me!

I smiled. "Oh, I would."

Killing her would be too easy. I wanted her to die in the worst way possible. And learning of her fear? I would use it against her.

Pinabuksan ko ang kabaong at pilit siyang pinapasok doon. She was begging Avo. She was begging him endlessly but her own son wouldn't even look at her.

What a pity.

Mas pinili ako ng anak niya kaysa sa kanya.

"Bury her," I said.

They were in their backyard. This was the reason why I wanted this to be done outside. Gusto ko na ilibing sila sa mismong pamamahay nila ng demonyong iyon. They rose to power because of her deviousness. And now, she'd descend in the very spot where she rose.

Nagsimula na si Avo na maghukay. I knew he could hear his mother shouting, begging him to stop. But he didn't. Because he knew what he'd have to bury next if he'd stop.

Nang matapos na siya, inilagay nila ang kabaong sa baba. Even here, I could hear the desperate wailing of his mother. She must've been very scared being inside a coffin.

"Bury her," I ordered at sinimulan nila na takpan siya ng lupa.

Tahimik akong nanonood. There was a camera and light installed inside the coffin and I could clearly see the face of his mother. She was crying. She was begging to make it stop.

"Augustus, please..." she said. Sumisigaw siya pero pahina nang pahina ang bawat sigaw niya.

Pinanood ko hanggang sa hindi na siya makapagsalita.

Pinanood ko hanggang sa maubusan siya ng hininga.

"Augustus..."

That was her last word.

And even though I wasn't the last person she saw before she died, I was glad to be the reason why she begged. Because they say that *Ostenhaimers* never beg. But I just made them beg.

And they were all at my mercy.

Nang matapos si Avo, naka-tingin siya sa akin. He wasn't saying a word.

"You just saved your baby, Avo," I said to him, holding my stomach.

DICTUM FACTUM

Chapitre Quarante Neuf

This night had been too long... but also, too fulfilling. Lorenzo already left but I chose to stay. I stayed until I was sure that the main bitch was really dead. I wouldn't risk to have her alive after everything I did to her... to her family. Dahil sigurado ako na kung buhay pa siya, she'd make it her life's mission to destroy me. Because that's what I did after she did the same thing to me.

And then it would be an endless cycle of revenge.

And I didn't want that.

I stayed for another hour just to make sure that she indeed was dead already. Pinanood ko siya habang bukas ang mga mata at hindi humihinga. She must've been so scared and so angry at the world. Sino ba naman kasi ang mag-aakala na mismong anak niya ang magta-traydor sa kanila?

But I was hoping that maybe... maybe Avo saw how devious his parents were. Na kung anuman ang nangyari sa kanila, dahil iyon sa pagiging demonyo nila. But why was I even hoping? Even Avo was a devil himself.

Nang masiguro ko na wala na ang mga dapat kong patayin, tumayo na ako. I liked the fact that I was bathing in Ayo's blood but I reeked.

"Take a shower," biglang sabi ni Night. Hinagisan niya ako ng damit.

I looked at him. Nandito pa siya? Ang akala ko ay umalis na siya dahil hindi niya masikmura ang mga ginagawa ko. Why was he even surprised, really? He was the one who made me see the fun side of killing people? Tapos biglang magugulat siya?

"I'll shower at home," I said. I didn't trust any place besides my house. My enemies were everywhere.

"It's an hour from here. Take a shower. I'll be your look out."

Siguro naramdaman niya ang dahilan kung bakit ayaw ko.

"Why did you leave?"

"I didn't want to see you like that."

"Like what?"

He looked at me. "Like a monster. I still want to believe that somewhere inside you, there's the Boe I learned to like."

Tumaas ang sulok ng labi ko. "The Boe you learned to like? The one you always called hypocrite?" pagpapaalala ko sa kanya. He was the one who kept on telling me that I was a hypocrite. Na sinasabi ko lang pero hindi ko ginagawa. That I always had people doing the dirty works for me.

"She's dead, Night. And she's not coming back."

Nagsimula akong maglakad para maligo. I wanted to, anyway. And for some weird reasons, I knew Night would look after me. And I didn't even want to think why. I found it ridiculous to even consider if he was having feelings for me.

Pumasok ako sa CR at naligo. I stayed there. I washed myself as images began to flood my mind. How it felt seeing the people I hated being destroyed by one of their own.

How blood gushed from each of them.

The feel of their flesh being torn from their bones.

How they shouted from the pain I was making them feel.

The look on their faces as they realized their impending demise.

Nang makalabas ako, nandoon si Night at naka- bantay sa akin. He handed me another towel that I used to dry my hair.

"Thank you," I said. He nodded. Sabay kaming naglakad palabas. He was silent and I knew I should be thankful for the peace but with Night, silence was never a good thing. It meant that he was thinking. And him thinking always ended up with me being surprised.

And Night's surprises were never the welcomed ones.

He perfectly knew how to put me in the most compromising positions. When he drugged me to sleep with Avo. Nang ginamit niya ang pagbubuntis ko para mapauwi si Avo. He just knew how to play me.

"What are you thinking?" I managed to ask the question I had always wanted to ask him.

"You already killed them," he said. "What are you going to do now?"

I shrugged. "Celebrate, perhaps."

Tinignan niya ako. "Avo's coming home."

Natigilan ako. Sinalubong ko ang tingin ng mga mata niya. "I know."

"What are you going to do with him?"

I stopped and then faced him. I heaved a deep breath. "Night..." I trailed off. "Tonight, I killed the people who murdered my family. Let's leave it at that, alright? Let tomorrow worry about Avo."

I just wanted to relish the feeling. I just wanted to feel accomplished. That finally, after months of waiting in vain, I finally did it. I killed them.

And I finally fulfilled the promise that I made to my parents. I hoped that they'd remember me kapag nagkita-kita na sila sa ibaba. That the *Ostenhaimers* would tell my parents how I killed them.

How merciless I had been.

The monster that I was... kahit na sinubukan akong pigilin ng mga magulang ko.

The drive home was tranquil. No one spoke. We sat in comfortable silence. I didn't initiate a small talk because I, too, was tired from everything that I did. Hanggang sa makarating kami sa bahay, hindi ko

na namalayan dahil nakaramdam na ako ng pagod. I fell asleep and I just stirred from it when I felt that I was being carried.

"Night," I uttered in a hush.

"I'm bringing you to your room," he replied.

I nodded. I didn't want to argue with him anymore. I was tired.

Pagdating sa kwarto, maingat niya akong ibinaba sa kama at saka tinakpan ng kumot. I could feel his fingers running through my hair. I could feel his gaze boring a hole through my skull.

I wanted to make him leave... but his presence pacified me.

When he's with me, I felt safe. And ironic as it was, I didn't have any qualms. If Night wanted me dead, he already had several chances to do so. And if he was planning for something grand for my death, there was really nothing I could do to prevent it.

I chose to wait for my death in peace.

"Sleep," he hushed.

"Good night..." I mumbled in my half-asleep state.

And then I felt his lips on my lips.

"Sleep tight, Belinda."

He continued to brush my hair with his fingers until I was lulled to sleep. And for the first time, I was able to get a dreamless sleep.

Without my parents chasing after me.

Without Ella shouting behind me.

Without Cathy asking me why.

When the morning rolled in, I was feeling tired but full of energy. Ang unang sumalubong sa akin ay ang bulaklak na pinadala ni Lorenzo. It was a beautiful bouquet of sunflowers. I read the card and it said,

Congratulations. –Lorenzo

Napa-ngiti ako at pina-lagay sa vase iyong mga bulaklak. Lorenzo was indeed a peculiar person. He didn't send flowers for the usual occasions. He didn't even greet me on my birthday the usual way. Instead, he sent a congratulatory card dahil nakuha ko na ang kapangyarihan bilang isang *Estrella*.

I guessed that that's the kind of event that Lorenzo deemed worthy to be celebrated.

When I came to the dining area, I was surprised not to find Night there. Madalas kasi ay doon ko siya unang nakikita. He would usually cook breakfast for me and then nag me to eat healthily.

"Where's Night?"

"Umalis po kagabi."

"What?" Tumaas ang kilay ko. "Hindi ba't kabilin-bilinan ko na 'wag niyo siyang hahayaan na umalis?"

God, it was early in the morning pero pinapasakit agad ni Angela ang ulo ko! She was tempting me to make her my next victim! Her being this incompetent
was a crime against humanity!

"Miss Belinda... he was unstoppable. He really wanted to leave."

"Isa lang siya, ilan kayo? Hindi niyo nagawang pigilan?!"

Nawalan ako ng ganang kumain at saka tumayo. I wanted to call him but I remembered that I threw his phone away. Hindi ko rin alam kung saan siya magsisimulang hanapin. When Night wanted to hide, no one could really find him.

I was pacing back and forth. I already tasked Johann to track Night down. It was already afternoon and he wasn't back yet. It was unusual even for Night. Hindi lumalagpas ng ganito katagal ang pagkawala niya. He'd always come back early dahil alam niya na paranoid ako na bigla na lang siyang mawawala.

And when nighttime fell down and he was still nowhere in sight, I began to get worked-up.

"Do you know where Night is?" I asked Lorenzo. He was the one who found Night, after all. Kaya kung magtatago siya, alam ko na si Lorenzo rin ang makakahanap sa kanya.

"Why?" he asked, not even a hint of surprise in his voice. Alam niya. Alam niya kung nasaan si Night.

"I'm... worried."

Silence enveloped the line. No one spoke for seconds.

"The last thing you can do for Night is to worry. He can handle himself very well."

"I know but—"

Lorenzo cut me off. "Give him space. He needs to think."

"Ha? Bakit niya kailangang mag-isip? At bakit kailangan pa niyang umalis?"

I didn't understand. I tried to push him away. I tried to tell him that he should leave once I was done with Avo... but he told me that he'd stay. That he'd always be by my side. Kaya hindi ko maintindihan.

What changed?

What happened?

"What you need to worry about is Avo."

Natigilan ako. Avo. Si Avo.

"He's just finishing some things but he'll be back real soon, Estrella," Lorenzo said. I couldn't see him but I could feel the menace in his voice. Like he was warning me that something bigger was about to happen.

Akala ko ay tapos na ako. Napatay ko na ang mga pumatay sa mga magulang ko. But I made another deal.

And this time, I made it with the devil himself.

"What will you do?" he asked.

I couldn't answer.

I didn't have an answer.

I relished the victory too much that I forgot about Avo.

"He just wants the baby," I croaked.

"And you'll give it to him?"

Hindi ulit ako naka-sagot.

"And do you seriously believed that he only wants the baby?"

Nagtiim ang bagang ko. "What does he need again? Revenge? Will he take a revenge on me for killing his entire family?"

Dapat ba na pinatay ko na lang si Avo? Did I make a mistake by letting him live? But I knew I couldn't have done it without him. Tama si Lorenzo. The *Ostenhaimers* were untouchable. Kung hindi sa tulong ni Avo, alam ko na hinding-hindi ko malalapitan ni anino ng mga magulang niya.

He made everything possible...

And now, he's about to make the impossible.

"If he does, what will you do?"

Napa-tingin lamang ako kay Lorenzo. Hindi ko rin alam ang gagawin ko. My mind was still not prepared to think. I was still worrying over Night... and then the baby. I just couldn't and didn't want to deal with Avo's return yet.

I still wanted to bask in my glory.

"Will you let him kill you?" Lorenzo asked. "After all, you already finished your mission."

I clenched my jaw and stood up. I didn't want to wallow in this question. I didn't want to deal with the risks and uncertainties.

"I don't want to think about this right now, Lorenzo," I said and then began to limp away from him. My leg hurt so bad but I'd rather endure that than to listen to Lorenzo's questions. He really had a way to get into my nerves.

"Time is ticking, Estrella. Think," he said. "Think fast."

Mas lalo akong hindi natahimik dahil sa mga sinabi ni Lorenzo. I set aside my worry for Night and began to think about what I would do once Avo returns. And he would.

I could feel it in my skin.

I'd see him again.

Chapitre Cinquante

Nothing prepared me for Avo's return. I thought I would be prepared. I thought I already knew what I would do... but he found me when I wasn't looking. He spoke my name when I wasn't listening.

And now, he's here looking at me.

Hindi ako maka-galaw. Hindi ko maialis ang tingin ko sa kanya. I felt like I was stuck and the only thing I could do was to look at him—and then ask myself if what I was seeing was real.

Because he's really here. Beside me. In my bed. Looking straight into my eyes.

I wanted to move. I wanted to move away from him but I couldn't even lift a muscle. My eyes were glued on him and it was like I was hypnotized.

"Good morning," he said, his voice dangerously low. I felt chills in my spine when I heard his voice. It had been so long since I felt this... parang kahapon lang. Ang daming nangyari. Ni hindi ko inisip na aabot kaming dalawa sa ganito. When I first met him, I knew he was bad news but I decided to ignore my mind. I followed my heart and I followed him. I let myself believe his lies; I let myself be his fool. I trusted my heart to him. Pinagkatiwalaan ko siya na hindi niya ako sasaktan... na kahit marami siyang itinatago sa akin, umasa ako na isang araw ay sasabihin

niya sa akin. Umasa ako na kahit marami akong hindi sinabi sa kanya, hindi niya gagamitin ang mga iyon para saktan ako.

But all of those were just expectations.

And those gave me disappointment.

And a broken heart to complete the deal.

He made a fool out of me. He broke my spirit. He took everything from me. Hindi pa siya nakuntento at sinaktan niya pa ako.

"You're already showing," he said, his eyes darted on my stomach. My top was lifted and suddenly, I felt exposed. Na dapat ay hindi ko naman nararamdaman dahil nakita niya na ang lahat sa akin. "When's your due?"

"Hindi ko alam," I replied as cold as I could muster.

"Who's your doctor?"

"Dr. Vargas."

"Is the doctor any good?"

I arched my brow. "Why?"

"Of course it's important. I wouldn't want an incompetent doctor to look after you and the baby."

I wanted to roll my eyes but fought so hard to do so. I still hadn't assessed the situation yet. Hindi ko alam kung ano ang pakay sa akin ni Avo bukod sa anak niya. But I was sure that he wouldn't harm me. I was still carrying his baby... and that meant that I had a few months to device a plan that would enable my survival.

"She's good," I just said. Akmang tatayo ako sa kama nang pigilan niya ako. "What?" I asked.

"You're still injured," he said, pertaining to the shot on my leg.

"I'm fine."

"What do you need? I'll get it for you."

"I'm fine," I reiterated. I didn't need his help. Tapos na kung anuman ang kailangan ko sa kanya. What I needed was to be away from him as much as possible. But it didn't look possible. Alam ko na hindi siya hihiwalay sa akin... probably making sure that I wouldn't go opposite of

what I promised him.

Sinisiguro niya na hindi ko papatayin ang anak niya. Kasi sigurado naman ako na iyon lang ang dahilan kung bakit nandito siya at kasama ako. He had other options. He had *all* the options. Wala na ang mga magulang niya. Wala na si Ayo. Sa kanya na napunta lahat ng yaman at pag-aari ng mga *Ostenhaimers*. And I was sure that everyone in Europe was at his mercy.

Yet here he was.

Looking at me like he just didn't show me his color. His *real, ugly* color.

I tried to limp away from him but just a step away and I already felt the stinging pain shot across my system. Agad akong natumba at napapikit sa sobrang sakit. God! Now, I realized how dumb it was to shoot my leg! I should've shot my arm instead... but then I wouldn't have been able to cut Ayo into pieces.

"So fucking stubborn," he said while picking me up from the ground. Hindi na ako umangal dahil talagang masakit iyong binti ko. He laid me on the bed and then stared at me again.

"I'm fine. Hindi na ako tatayo. Just... leave."

I didn't want him looking at me. I didn't want him staring at me. Dahil sa tuwing titignan niya ako, hindi ko maiwasan na isipin na ang naiisip niya tuwing naka-tingin siya sa akin ay ako ang babaeng pumatay sa pamilya niya. Because that's what I thought about every time I would look at his face.

"No," he replied. The way he looked at me and the sharpness of his voice made it harder for me to breathe. "No way I'm leaving."

I pursed my lips. "I already gave you my word. Once this baby gets born, you'll have him or her and—"

"It's a him."

I was sure my eyes were already twitching so I held on tighter. I shouldn't lose my cool when it came to him. I should always be level-headed. I should always be rational because if I let my anger get the best

of me, hindi ko alam kung saan ako pupulutin. Lalo na at si Avo na mismo ang kaharap ko.

"Then it's a *him,*" I replied, my voice dripping with sarcasm.

The side of his lips rose as if he was very amused with me. "Do you have a name already?" I shook my head. "Why not?"

Why would I even bother to name this kid when all I have thought since I learned of his existence was either to kill him or to give him to his devil of a father? And by naming the kid, I was allowing myself to be attached.

And I promised myself not to be attached to anyone... not even to the child inside me. I would make no exception.

"Why are you really here, Avo? Because if it's about the kid, I *promise* you that you'll have him the second he's born. Kaya ano ba ang ginagawa mo dito?"

Asking him this question took a lot of gut. I couldn't run from him. I wouldn't be able to protect myself from him. But I needed to know why he was here when he had all the world.

And when he answered, his eyes were on me... as if he wanted to melt all of me. As if he wanted to see into my soul. As if he wanted to know of all my thoughts and of all my troubles.

I quickly shook the thought away. Hindi ako maaaring maging malambot—mas lalong hindi sa katulad niya. Because he's trouble. He had always been.

"You," he said.

"What?"

"Because you're here," he said, those eyes darting into my very soul. "I'm here because you're here."

Agad kong iniiwas ang tingin sa kanya. If I could, I wanted to cover my ears, as well. I didn't need these words from him. I had already been deceived once. Ayokong maulit pa iyon. And if before, he hated me for something I didn't even do, na pinaglaruan niya ako kahit na wala akong

kinalaman... paano pa ngayon? I killed his brother in front of him. I made him kill his parents.

I made him do the unimaginable. I couldn't even begin to know how much he must hate me.

"I'm not leaving anytime, Belinda."

I kept mum.

"So don't even bother to push me away... or to run."

He held my chin and made me look at him.

"Because I have all the time in the world... and all the means to chase after you."

Even if no one would address it, alam ko na naiilang sila sa pamamalagi ni Avo sa bahay ko. He was the one we were chasing before... tapos ngayon ay narito siya? And not only that. He was acting like he cared for me! Isang beses ay sinubuan niya pa ako. The surprised look on Angela's face didn't escape me.

"When's your next check-up?" he asked after we were done eating lunch. I normally didn't eat lunch. I eat heavy breakfast and then the next meal would be around 5pm. Ni hindi rin ako madalas na kumakain ng hapunan. But since Avo's arrival, he made sure that I eat at least five times a day.

"Tomorrow," I replied, feeling so full.

"And for today?"

"Work."

Hindi ko pa rin alam kung nasaan si Night pero sinigurado sa akin ni Lorenzo na nasa mabuti siyang kalagayan. Iyon lang ang pinanghahawakan ko but still. Sometimes, I couldn't help but wonder where he was and what he's doing.

"Just let your assistant do your work. You're pregnant," he reminded me.

I couldn't exactly tell him how incompetent Angelas was dahil sigurado ako na mapupunta kami kay Night. Kung paano si Night ang gumagawa ng lahat para sa akin. Kung paanong si Night ang nag-alaga sa akin.

And God! I didn't want him to know about Night and I! Hindi ko kaya na malaman ni Avo dahil hindi ko alam kung ano ang gagawin niya. By the way he's acting, he's acting like I was his. Na pag-aari niya ako. Did I sell my soul to him when I asked him to kill his parents for me? Ito ba ang kabayaran sa mga kagustuhan ko?

At ano na lang ang gagawin niya kapag nalaman niya ang lahat ng nangyari sa amin ni Night?

Maybe it was good that Night's somewhere far from here. Hindi ko kakayanin kung may masamang mangyayari sa kanya.

"Fine," I huffed. Agad kong tinawag si Angela. "I have a meeting with Valderrama today. Go in my stead."

Nanlaki ang mga mata ni Angela. "W-what, Miss Belinda?"

"It's fine," I assured her. I didn't want Avo to suspect anything. "I already prepped the documents and reviewed everything. Just make sure that the deal would be the same." I had all the time in the world now that my mission's finally complete. At isa pa, hindi ako pinapayagan ni Avo na maglakad kaya naman nasa kama lang ako palagi. I was practically forced to read every document at my disposal. At kapag nagbabasa ako, minsan ay may makikita akong mga maliliit na note na iniwan ni Night para sa akin. As if he knew that one day, he'd leave. Na ako ang maiiwan at mapipilitan ako na gawin ang lahat sa sarili ko. That's also why I made sure that the door's always locked. I didn't want Avo to see me getting all worked up kapag binabasa ko ang mga sulat ni Night para sa akin.

Why was I teary, anyway? It wasn't as if Night's dead. He's just away. Maybe it's the pregnancy hormone. Nababaliw na ako kung talaga naiiyak lang ako dahil sa sulat ni Night.

"Noted, Miss Belinda."

Agad na umalis si Angela. If I knew better, I'd assume that she's

scared of Avo. Well, she should be. Kung ako nga ay natatakot kay Avo, siya pa kaya? That's also why I asked Johann to install cameras in my room. I wanted them to look after me 24/7. Noon ay hindi ako pumayag dahil gusto ko ng privacy. But since I expected Avo's return, screw privacy. Pero ni hindi rin naman naka-tulong iyon dahil nagawa pa rin akong pasukin ni Avo nang hindi ko nalalaman.

Avo and his ways. When would I ever learn that there's nothing he couldn't do?

I tried to stand up but Avo was quick to assist me. Hinawakan niya ako sa bewang ko. I flinched but he didn't even notice—or maybe he did but he just ignored. Mas hinigpitan niya ang hawak sa akin.

"Where are you going?"

"To my room."

"Can I go?"

"Ha?"

Mas hinigpitan niya ang hawak sa bewang ko. "Inside your room, can I go?" he asked. Kumunot ang noo ko. Ano'ng sinasabi niya? "You always lock yourself inside."

"So?"

"I assume you don't want me barging inside. So, I'm asking you if I can go inside."

I arched my brow. "Kung sinabi ko bang hindi pwede, hindi ka papasok?"

We were so close. His face was just a few inches away from mine. I couldn't even move my face. Naka-tingin lang ako sa mga mata niya... but I was fighting the urge not to get lost in those orbs.

"No," he breathed.

"Why?" I asked, almost breathless.

His thumb was caressing the sides of my waist. "Because I'm trying to be a gentleman." I blinked. Once. Twice. Hindi ko alam kung ano ang gusto niyang iparating. "I know we had a rough start—"

"That will be an understatement," I cut him off.

"Yes," he breathed. "Our start wasn't promising that's why I'm trying to make up for it."

"And why?"

"Because we're having a kid."

Unti-unti kong inalis ang hawak niya sa bewang ko. "*You're* having a kid. I'm not." Pero bago ko pa man tuluyang maalis ang hawak niya, agad niya iyong ibinalik. And this time, he held on tighter.

"We're doing this together," he insisted.

"What?" hindi maka-paniwala kong tanong.

"You and I, we'll raise our kid together."

Nagsimula akong tumawa sa sinabi niya. Nababaliw na nga talaga siya! Ano ang akala niya? Ganoon lang kadaling magsimula ulit? Na ganoon lang kadali na kalimutan lahat ng nangyari sa pagitan namin? Na ganoon lang kadali na magpatawad?

If it were that easy to forgive, then I wouldn't be this miserable!

"You must be kidding me."

He pulled me closer, his face, only an inch away from mine. Just one wrong move and his lips would meet mine. Lumakas ang tibok ng puso ko. Hindi na ako mapakali. I wanted to push him away but he wasn't giving me any chance to.

"Am I?" he breathed. God.

"Yes."

"Am I, really, Belinda?" He pulled me closer—if that was even possible.

I nodded. "We're never going to happen, Avo."

He smirked. "We happened once, Belinda. What makes you think we can't happen again?"

I gritted my teeth and pushed him with all the strength I could muster. "Because I'm not the same naive girl you used to play with!"

His hand went from my waist to my face. His thumb was sensually caressing my cheek, making me feel all the sensation I didn't want to feel—from him. Ever. "That's why I want you now, Belinda. You're not

the naive girl who bored the hell out of me. You actually grew to be the person who caught my attention."

"That's because you hurt me!"

"And that's why they say that sometimes, pain is good."

He leaned in and I caught my breath. One wrong move and our lips would touch.

"I'll kiss you," he whispered.

"No," I gasped.

"Yes," he breathed.

His eyes were hypnotic and I was being hypnotized. His lips were inviting and I was allured. I shook my head.

"No," I repeated.

He moved closer, I could feel his lips on mine. "Say yes..."

And then memories began to flood me. Everything. Every kiss we shared, every touch he made, the way he made me feel, the way he took me...

"Yes."

Chapitre Cinquente Et Un

His kisses were never gentle. He kissed me and tasted every inch of my mouth. I felt like I was drowning and he wasn't even making an effort to save me. Sa bawat paggalaw ng labi niya sa labi ko, mas lalo akong nalulubog.

Isinandal niya ako sa pader at patuloy na hinalikan. His hands were on my waist, helping me to stand up. My knees were wobbling at every stroke of his tongue against mine. Kung hindi dahil sa pagtulong niya sa akin, palagay ko ay nasa sahig na ako.

"No..." I kept on whispering... and whimpering. His mouth moved south, leaving marks on my neck.

"If you don't want this, stop moaning," he said, snaking his hand inside my top. His hand cupped my breast and began kneading it. Even with my bra, I could still feel my nipples growing taut. "I bet if my hand goes south, I could feel how wet you are..."

I closed my eyes. "No..." I repeated.

"Do you want me to feel how wet you are?" he asked, his voice ragged.

I shook my head and then bit my lip when his hand left my breast. I could feel his hand going down on me, attemping to get inside my pants.

"There are cameras," I whimpered.

"Do you want them to watch as I fuck you, Belinda?" he whispered

against my ears.

"No..."

"Where do you want me to fuck you?"

"There are cameras everywhere..." I moaned. His hand was inside my pants, skillfully stroking my clit with his thumb. I wanted to moan his name out loud... but there were people everywhere. I fucking filled this place with people so that Avo would think twice before harming me.

But that seemed like a dumb decision right now.

He pulled his hand from my underwear. Biglang nanlaki ang mga mata ko nang ipasok niya sa bibig niya ang daliri niya. He was intently looking at me while sucking his finger. "Delicious."

I stared at him, wide-eyed, at nang matapos siya, he scooped me from the ground and began walking. "Saan mo ako dadalhin?" I asked, my heart still racing wildly inside my chest. My core was heated from his touch.

God, I felt so hot for him!

"Somewhere without fucking cameras."

His strides were fast and I was thankful for it. I hated him but I loved how he made me feel. He made me feel wanton against his touch. He made me want to be fucked by him.

Nagulat ako nang bigla kaming maka-rating sa garahe. At least ten cars were there. An idea came into mind that sent my heart into an overdrive.

"Why are we here?"

"No cameras," he said. He fished for a key in his pocket and then clicked the keyfob. A Range Rover roared to life. With me still in his arms, he went to the car and deposited me in the backseat of his car.

My heart drummed inside my chest. Would he fuck me in his car? The idea sent heat across my system.

Nang masiguradong maayos na ako, agad siyang pumasok. He was over me, his eyes were on mine. I could hear my heart beating... or maybe it was his? Hindi ko alam. Sobrang lakas ng tibok ng puso ko na tipong

naririnig ko na iyon. I was afraid that my heart would explode from the sensation he was making me feel.

"Here?" I asked, my heart wild inside my chest.

The side of his lips rose. "Yes," he said, his voice low. "There are no cameras here..." His hand slid down the strap of my top. "And no one's here." His leg was parting my legs. "You can be as loud as you want..."

When he dipped his lips, I thought he would be kissing me but his lips enveloped my breast. He was kissing it, his teeth deliciously tugging my nipples. Ang isang kamay niya naman ay abala para masahihin ang kabila. I didn't know what to do. My head didn't know where to turn; my hands were on his head, pushing him to do more... to make me feel more.

And when I thought he was already making me feel too much, his other hand went inside my bottoms and then began gently massaging my clit.

"Oh, God..." I moaned.

"Moan my name," he whispered.

I didn't comply. At the back of my head, I knew I was doing the wrong thing. Why the hell was I allowing him to touch me like this? To see me unguarded? He's my enemy! Just because he killed for me didn't mean every bad blood between us was gone.

And then there it was...

"Shit," I gasped when I felt his long fingers assaulting me. He began to finger fuck me while his eyes were dark and darted on mine.

"You never fucking follow me, Belinda," he said, his fingers continuously thrusting in and out.

My lips were parted deliciously. Fucking Avo! "You're not the boss of me," I replied. I tried so hard to reply. I was going crazy with what he's doing to me.

"Let's see," he said and then he withdrew his fingers from my core. I felt fucking empty. His eyes were drunk and his hands were unbuttoning his jeans. "Do I need to fuck you into submission, Belinda?" he asked. He

pulled out his length and began stroking it slowly as he looked at me. As seconds passed, his length grew larger... and I grew hungrier.

"Fuck you, Avo."

He smirked. "You will, wife. You will," he replied, still touching himself. I could see his pre-cum but being the bastard that he was, I was sure that he wouldn't fuck me until I was begging him to.

He's nothing like Night. Avo's a selfish bastard and I'd be damned if I let myself feel something for him again.

I was thinking of a way to get away from him when he pulled my leg up and put it on his shoulder. And then he pushed himself inside me. All of him. Agad na nanlaki ang mga mata ko.

"I tried to fuck another to forget you," he said as he began to thrust. My lips were parted. I felt so full... every inch of him was inside me. I was going crazy. "I tried to forget you but you made it impossible to do so..."

I bit my lower lip to stop myself from moaning. I didn't want him to have the satisfaction of seeing me enjoy what he's doing to me.

"What's with you, Belinda? What is with you that's so hard to forget?"

His question was lost when he began to quicken his pace. He was fucking me fast. And hard. Nararamdaman ko na nauuntog ako sa pintuan ng sasakyan pero wala akong pakielam. I wanted what he was doing and I was already tasting the metallic taste in my mouth. I was biting my lips so hard to prevent myself from moaning... from telling him how good this was.

"You used to be a fucking bore. A fucking pretender. You used to pretend to be someone you're not so why are you so mad at me for pretending to be my brother? We aren't so different, Belinda."

How could he say these things while fucking? Ginawa niya ba ito para mag-sona sa harapan ko?!

"And now... we're alike more than ever," he said, pumping in and out of my core. "But why do you still hate me?"

I took a deep breath. "I'll always hate you," I said as I felt his length filling me completely. "Until my death, I'll hate you."

He clenched his jaw. "Why?" he asked.

"Because you hurt me."

"You made me kill my parents."

"They deserve it."

And then he stopped. And he was still inside me.

"It's one thing to kill them... it's another to have their own son murder them."

He pulled himself out of me.

"You keep on telling me that I'm a monster for hurting you... maybe it's high time you take a look of yourself at the mirror."

Chapitre Cinquente Deux

The tension was very palpable. I felt it every time Avo was around me. Simula ng may nangyari sa amin sa sasakyan niya, tuwing tinitignan niya ako ay parang may gusto siyang iparating pero ayaw niyang sabihin.

It was like he was telling me that I was being a hypocrite for hating him for something that I, too, was doing.

But what he didn't understand was that he was never innocent. He knew everything all along. Alam niya ang lahat ng mga nangyayari habang ako ay walang ka-alam-alam. I was made a fool. I was made to believe that my parents were still alive when in fact, they have been brutally murdered by his parents. Kaya sa tingin niya ba ay pareho talaga kami?

And I gave him a choice. And it was his choice to choose his child over his demon of a parents. Kaya bakit niya sa akin isinusumbat iyon?

I heeded Dr. Vargas' suggestion of bed rest. I wanted to be able to walk as soon as possible. Ayoko na na sa tuwing lalapitan ako ni Avo, wala akong magawa dahil ni hindi ako maka-lakad. I wanted to be able to run away from him. I wanted to have a choice of not listening to him when he's preaching about me being a hypocrite.

And I wanted to be able to push him away. I didn't want a re-run of what *almost* happened between the two of us.

"Where are you going?"

Avo's voice stopped me. Nakaka-lakad na ako nang paunti-unti. It still hurt but I could manage.

"I have a meeting to attend."

"Make your secretary go."

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. "It's my business, Avo. And the last time I checked, Angela's not the owner of my organization," I replied. I just didn't want him to know how incompetent Angela had been. Nagkaroon ng kaguluhan sa shipment ng mga armas dahil sa katangahan niya. I just couldn't get mad at her dahil palaging nakapa-libot sa akin si Avo. I had to pretend that everything was cool.

"It's not like she'll steal it from you."

I sighed. "What is it that you want?"

"I met with Dr. Vargas—"

"Why are you meeting with *my* doctor?"

He arched his brow. Good. Now, we're both equally pissed at each other. Good thing that the feeling was mutual.

"You're being real stubborn, Belinda—"

I cut him off again. "And stop calling me *Belinda*."

"It's your name."

"I know. But when it's you who's saying it, it makes me want to kill myself."

He clenched his jaw. Was I being too hard on him? But it surely wasn't enough to give him a clue na ayaw ko na narito siya sa pamamahay ko. He's being a pain in the ass! Ipinangako ko naman sa kanya na ibibigay ko ang anak niya. What else did he want me to do?! I just couldn't breathe with him around me all the time! He made me feel so suffocated!

"What do you want me to call you? Boe? Because that name makes me want to kill myself. You were sure a bore then."

Naka-tingin kami sa isa at nagsusukatan. How seriously did he expect us both to raise a kid kung ganito pa lang ay halos magpatayan na kami?

Did he want us to raise another devil? Dahil sigurado ako na ganoon ang kahihinatnan ng anak namin kapag kaming dalawa ang nagpalaki.

"Just go back to France, Avo," I said and then attempted to get pass him. Pero bago pa man ako makalayo ay hinawakan niya ako sa braso. "Get your hands off me."

"No," he was quick to reply.

"You're such an asshole."

"And you're a brat."

Napa-awang ang labi ko. "A brat?" hindi ko maka-paniwalang tanong. Tila gusto kong matawa. Didn't he have any better insults to hurdle at me?

"Yes, you're acting like a brat, Belinda. Stop playing push and pull with me," he said, gazing into my eyes. Unti-unti kong tinanggal ang pagkakahawak niya sa akin.

"I'm not playing push and pull with you, Avo. I'm just *pushing* you away. Let's make it clear."

I began to limp away from him but like the bastard that he was, he didn't let me go. Bigla niya akong binuhat at dire-diretsong naglakad palabas.

"Ibaba mo nga ako!" I kept on shouting but he was deaf to my complaints. I shouted at my people to help me all of them seemed to have turned a blind eye. Takot silang lahat kay Avo! But weren't they scared of me?! I could kill them, too, for not helping me get away from this bastard!

"Where are you taking me?!" He was putting seatbelt on me and then revved the engine to life. "I'm not allowed to leave without my security!" I reminded him. His parents were dead, yes, but there was still a bounty on my head! Hanggang ngayon ay gusto pa rin akong patayin ng mga magulang ni Ella at Fuji dahil sa ginawa ko sa anak nila!

He began to drive without even bothering to answer my question! At nang makarating kami sa gate, ibinaba niya ang bintana.

"Open."

That's it. He said one word and that imbecile of a guard opened the gate kahit na sinigawan ko siya at sinabi kong papatayin ko ang pamilya niya. God! Ako pa ba talaga ang may-ari ng bahay na 'to o si Avo na?! Why was everyone so fucking scared of him but not of me?!

He was driving fast. He was driving so fast that the only thing I was left to do was to hold on to the seatbelt and pray that we wouldn't crash against anything. Nang maka-rating kami sa highway ay unti-unting naging normal ang pagpapatakbo niya. Maybe because he knew there was nothing left to run to. We're in a freaking highway to South!

"Saan mo ako dadalhin?" I asked again. Maybe now he'd answer me. Hindi ko alam kung saan niya ako dadalhin. I had business to attend to but he just took my away without even asking kung gusto ko ba.

"Somewhere quiet."

"If something happens to me, kasalanan mo 'yun."

I was looking left and right. Hindi ko alam kung nasaan ang mga kaaway ko. For all I knew, they were already tipped off that I was outside without any guard to protect me. I felt so exposed. I felt like a sitting duck in the middle of nowhere.

"I'll protect you."

"Funny because that sounds familiar."

'I'll destroy anyone who dares hurt you.'

Fucking lies.

He clutched on the steering wheel tighter. "I already killed my parents for you. I let you kill my brother. What more do you want from me?"

"I want you gone from my life. Kaya mo bang ibigay?"

And another round of silence enveloped us.

I fell fast asleep. Nang magising ako ay nasa tila isang gubat kaming dalawa. Wala si Avo sa sasakyan kaya naman bumaba ako. I held on to my gun, just in case. I still didn't trust Avo and I wasn't sure if I'd ever be

able to trust him. Because the only thing holding him back from taking my life was his child inside me. And once he's out, alam ko na mawawalan na siya ng dahilan para hayaan akong mabuhay.

There were trees everywhere. The air was surprisingly refreshing. And it felt weird to hear the chirping of the birds. I was indeed away from the city.

Naglakad-lakad ako hanggang sa maka-kita ako ng isang maliit na bahay. It wasn't anything near like a hut. In fact, it was made of steel. Na parang hindi siya maaaring pasukin ng kahit na sino.

"Took you long enough."

Napa-pitlag ako nang marinig ko si Avo mula sa likuran ko. He was carrying pieces of woods on his shoulders. Beads of sweat were running down his face.

"Where are we?"

"In my cabin."

"Is it safe here?"

He sighed. "Why will I bring you here if it's not safe?" he said and then walked pass me. Why did I feel that I kept on offending him when in fact, my worry for my safety was warranted. I was sure that Johann was already looking for me. Ang bilin ko sa kanya ay dapat palagi niya akong bantayan dahil sa oras na may masamang mangyari sa akin, siya ang mananagot. I wasn't paying him buttload of money for nothing.

Pumasok siya sa cabin niya at sumunod naman ako. The interior was surprisingly modern. There was a small couch and a shelf full of books. Lumapit ako roon at tinignan ang mga libro. I never pegged Avo to be a reader.

"Are you hungry?" he asked. Just then, I felt my hunger so I nodded. "Feel at home. I'll just make something for you."

I sat down and watched him as he moved with grace... na para bang sanay na sanay siya sa kusina. "Since when did you learn how to cook?" I asked. Pilit kong inalala kung marunong ba siyang magluto pero kahit minsan, alam ko na hindi ko siya nakita na nagluluto noong nasa *AdM*

pa kami.

"Just last month."

"Why?"

"I was on the run."

"Why?"

He was stirring something and I thought he wouldn't answer my question. Kapag kasi siya ang nagtatanong sa akin, wala akong ibang ginawa kung hindi ang barahin siya. I wouldn't be surprised if he'd do the same to me. After all, that's what we're both good at—hurting each other.

"I failed my parents' order to get the information about Ayo from you."

"That's why you ran?" hindi maka-paniwala kong tanong. Lorenzo said that Avo's the heir to the organization. Sigurado ako na walang gagawin na masama sa kanya ang mga magulang ko.

"They wanted me to kill you instead."

Agad akong natigilan.

"Food's ready," he continued like he didn't just tell me that his parents wanted me dead. Inilapag niya ang plato sa lamesa at tinignan ako. "It's better to eat it while it's hot."

Hindi ako agad naka-galaw. My head was still wrapped around what he just said. "Why?" I managed to ask after seconds of complete silence. "Why didn't you just kill me?"

He could've done that instead. It was so easy for him to kill me. Nagawa niyang pasukin ang bahay ko ng hindi ko nalalaman kaya alam ko na napaka-dali lang sa kanya na tanggalan ako ng buhay.

So... why?

"I don't want to."

"Why?" I asked again. I would ask him *why* again and again. Hanggang hindi niya ako binibigyan ng matinong sagot, patuloy ko siyang tatanungin.

"If I answer you, you wouldn't believe me anyway."

"Try me."

He looked at me—those eyes dark and dangerous... but for some reasons strange to me, I didn't feel scared anymore. It was like I was taken back to the time when he was the source of my strength. Noong mga panahon na hindi ako natatakot sa mga naka-paligid sa akin dahil alam ko na po-protektahan ako ni Avo.

Back when the time I felt like I was invincible just because he was with me. He used to make me feel safe every time.

"I fell in love with you."

He said those words like they were the truth. Like he didn't hurt me. Like he didn't play me.

"You fell in love with me?"

He didn't move. We both were measuring each other through stares. No one wanted to break the contact.

"I fell in love with the real you... the *crazy* you. I fell in love with you when you weren't pretending to be someone you're not. I fell in love with the crazy side of you. I fell in love even when you want to kill me. I fell in love even when you made me do things I didn't even want to do. I fell in love even when I should be hating you for hating me for the things I had no control over."

Every word he said, it felt true. Like it was his truth and he was unfolding right before my very eyes. But should I believe him? After everything we've been through, ngayon pa ba ako maniniwala sa kanya?

"How can I kill the person I love, Belinda?" he asked, his eyes locked with mine. "How can I kill the only person who made me feel love when all my life, I believed that love is a concept that will forever remain foreign to me?"

My heart was drumming inside my chest. My lips quivering. My mind unbelieving.

"I know you don't believe me. But I have an entire lifetime to make my point." He pushed the plate towards me. "Now, eat. The doctor said you should always eat on time."

Iniwan niya ako na nakatulala. I couldn't believe what I just heard. Avo? In love with me? Was this another ploy of him? Ano na naman ang balak niyang gawin sa akin? May ibang plano na naman ba siya?

O baka naman may isa pa siyang kapatid na itinago ng mga magulang ko na gusto niyang makuha mula sa akin?

Hindi ko na alam. Pagdating sa kanya, hindi ko na alam.

When night fell down, it started to get cold. Ngayon ko lang naintindihan kung bakit kumuha si Avo ng kahoy kanina.

"Why can't you just install heater?" I asked as he was throwing woods to the fire.

"I like getting woods. It's relaxing."

"Palagi ka bang nandito?"

Umiling siya. "This was Ayo's."

Natigilan ako. I didn't want to talk about Ayo with him. Palagi kong naaalala kung paano ko siya pinatay. Kung paano ko siya sinaktan noong malaman niya na sarili niyang kapatid ang nagka-nuno sa mismong pamilya niya.

"He used to go here when he wanted to escape from *AdM*."

I didn't reply. I let my silence speak for me.

Tahimik kaming naka-upo sa harap ng fireplace. Walang nagsasalita. Hindi ko rin kasi alam kung ano ang sasabihin. Ano ba ang pag-uusapan namin? There were lots of topic to choose from... but all of those were topics I wanted to avoid. There was just bad blood between the two of us. Things we could never erase.

"Once I give birth, dadalhin mo ba siya sa France?" I asked, breaking the silence. I just couldn't sit in silence with him. Kinakain ako ng katahimikan. Nagkakaroon ako ng pagkakataon para mag-isip. And with him, I didn't want to think. My thoughts scared me. My thoughts gave me nightmares.

"Will you come?" he asked.

"What?"

He looked at me. "Will you come to France?"

Agad akong umiling. "My life's here. Bakit ako sasama sa 'yo?"

"Do you love Night?"

Natigilan ako. Bumilis muli ang tibok ng puso ko.

"W-what?" I asked, slightly stuttering.

"I know he spent time with you while I was away. I'm not stupid," he said, not breaking our eye contact. "I have people watching you, Belinda. I may have been away, but I always know everything about you."

"Kung may mga tao ka sa paligid ko, bakit hindi mo na lang iniutos sa kanila na kuhanin si Ayo?"

"Because he's the only reason why you're looking at me. I'm afraid that if I get him, you'll lose interest."

"Did you really sacrifice your entire family for me?" hindi ko makapaniwalang tanong.

He threw another wood to the fire. It blazed and the fire reflected on his eyes.

"My parents were not saints, Belinda. I knew about every fucked up things they did. I was a witness to everything they did, to every lives they destroyed. And you may disagree with me but I didn't like the fact that they killed your parents for something that my parents willingly did. They gave Ayo to your parents as a payment for your brother's death. I just didn't understand why they'd ask for revenge when they sentenced my brother's death in the first place."

I let him speak. For the first time, I wanted to hear everything in his mind.

"My father's evil... but my mother's something greater than evil. She wanted me to kill you and bring my brother back. I hated that she thought she could control me."

As he spoke, the fire flared.

"And when she learned that I am in love with you, she wanted to kill you herself."

He looked at me, the fire in his eyes was very visible. "And I wouldn't let that happen."

"So you killed her instead," I said.

"Death's always the final destination, Belinda. It just so happened that hers came faster than intended."

Hindi na ulit ako nakapagsalita matapos ng naging usapan namin. I was still trying to digest everything he said... his admission of his feelings for me, of what truly happened while he was away.

And I was still finding it hard to believe. That he had feelings for me. Because... why?

I didn't know for how long we were sitting in front of the fire. All I knew was that I sat there until the fire died.

"Use the room. I'll stay on the couch," he said. I glanced at the couch and it was obviously too small for him. Avo's a tall guy and that couch wouldn't let him sleep peacefully.

"Use the room. I'll stay on the couch," I parroted him.

"No," he replied.

"You're tall. Hindi ka makakatulog nang maayos."

"And you're pregnant. I won't be able to sleep peacefully knowing that you're uncomfortable in a couch."

I sighed. Why did we always end up in disagreement?

"Then let's sleep both in the bed," I offered. He arched his brow. "But don't get any ideas."

"And why not? You're already pregnant with my child. Best case scenario, we'll add another one and make that a twin," he said, the side of his lips slightly rising.

I faked a laugh. "Funny," I replied and then marched towards the room. I didn't bring anything with me—not even a clean shirt.

Akmang hihiga na ako nang magulat ako dahil naghubad si Avo ng damit niya.

"What do you think you're doing?!"

"Sleeping."

"Naked?!"

He nodded and then sat on the bed. "I sleep naked."

"Well, you're not alone!"

He shrugged. "You've already seen me naked. What's the big deal?" he casually said and then lie down. He patted the space beside him. My eyes were glued on his length which was standing proudly. "Lay beside me."

"No."

"I won't do anything without your permission, Belinda. Stop being a brat and come here." But my eyes were still on his length. God. How would I be able to sleep with him naked beside me?!

His eyes found what I was looking at and he smiled. Napunta ang kamay niya doon. He began to stroke himself, making his length grow bigger. God, I felt hot again!

"If you don't want me inside you, I can masturbate in front of you, Belinda. Anything to satisfy you, wife," he said, continuously touching himself... making me wetter than I already was. I could feel the heat pooling inside my core. My throat felt dry.

The tip of his length was glistening with his cum. I gulped at the sight of him.

"Fuck," he moaned. His eyes were closed and he was stroking himself. Naka-tayo ako habang pinapanood siyang paligayahin ang sarili niya. Hindi ko alam ang gagawin. Alam ko na dapat akong umalis... na hindi ko dapat siya panoorin pero hindi ako maka-galaw sa kinatatayuan ko. I was stuck... or maybe I didn't want to move.

All I knew was that he was making me feel hot all over.

And I wanted to taste him. Like how he always tasted me.

His breathing was ragged. His lips parted in pleasure.

"Shit," he moaned.

Hindi ko napigilan ang sarili ko. I went on the bed and then enclosed my mouth around his length. I opened my eyes and watched him as he watched me. His eyes were drunk as mine. Agad niyang hinawakan ang buhok ko para hindi matakpan ang mukha ko.

"Shit," he repeated as I tried to take all of him inside me. He was too big, too long. I gagged. "Don't..." he moaned when I pulled back to breathe. The way his face looked gave me strength to continue. I began to suck him again. This time, the hell I care if I gag.

Avo's lips were parted in pleasure. I swirled my tongue around his length and was careful not to graze my teeth around him.

"I'm near," he said, his breathing ragged. He tried to pull himself away from me but I held his hips. I wanted to taste him. "No," he said. He pulled himself from my mouth and he was quick to pull my pants down.

The next thing I knew, I was riding him.

I was sitting on him, his hands guiding me up and down. Naka-awang ang mga labi ko. He was so fast, so quick. Ni hindi ko namalayan sa sobrang bilis ng mga pangyayari. I thought this was too much but then, he leaned in and then kissed me. His lips were moving with such urgency, his tongue seeking entrace. Ibinukas ko ang bibig ko para sa kanya. He traced every contour of my mouth, as if he wanted to taste more of me. My lips felt sore from kissing him but we didn't stop. We kept on kissing and kissing while I continued to ride him. Ramdam ko ang pagtulo ng pawis mula sa akin.

And when I felt his fingers on my clit, parang mababaliw na naman ako sa sensasyong pinaparamdam niya sa akin.

"Oh, God," I moaned when he began to massage my clit.

He began to pump faster... and harder. He bit the side of my neck as we began to tremble while in each other's arms.

Chapitre Cinquente Trois

We stayed entangled in each other's arms. Only our breathing could be heard. And as much as my mind was telling me that what I was doing was dangerous, I seemed not to care much.

"What are you thinking?" he asked, drawing circles on my arms.

"Nothing."

"Then why sigh?"

His other hand went to my stomach, gently caressing the bump. In my head, Avo was nothing better than a monster... but I couldn't deny the fact that he cared and loved this child inside me. He wouldn't go this far if he didn't care about the baby so much.

Maybe there's still hope for him... no matter how faint it might be.

"What are we doing?" I asked. I took this opportunity to spill all my unspoken thoughts. "We're playing with fire, Avo... because me and you, we can never happen."

A lot of things happened between us—mga bagay na hindi madaling burahin. Mga bagay na hindi madaling kalimutan. There were lots of memories between the two of us—most of them were ugly... kaya paano magiging posible ang gusto niyang mangyari? Because what he wanted was for us to be together, to raise a kid together. Isang bagay na ni sa hinagap ko ay alam kong hindi mangyayari.

"Why can't we?" he asked back.

"There are lots of things between us."

"So?"

"There's too much history."

"So?"

I removed his hold on me and looked at him. I had always been in awe with how good he looked. But we've been through a lot. I had seen the worst in him... and the best in him. Hindi ko na alam kung saan ako titingin. Hindi ko na alam kung saan ko itutuon ang atensyon ko. Should I just focus on the good thing and just forget all the horrid things he did? Or should I focus on the monster inside him and focus on protecting myself?

With him, I had always been at an impasse.

"Take me seriously," I said.

"I'm serious, Belinda. I don't see where the problem is."

"Us. We have always been problematic."

"That's not us. That's the problem created by our parents. Why are you trying so hard to make it ours?" he asked, frustration laced in his voice. "They're all dead, Belinda. Shouldn't you take this opportunity to start anew? To finally stop dragging the past back? Because from my perspective, you're addicted to the chaos. You love the war. You love the struggle. You find peace and calm problematic."

I clenched my jaw. "That's not true."

"It is. Because if it's not, then why do you keep on giving me these bullshits of a reason every time I tell you that I want to be with you?"

"Because how can you want me? I killed your brother! I made you kill your parents! How can you want me after everything we did to each other?!" I shouted. "Nababaliw ka na ba para gustuhin ako?!"

My chest was heaving and we were both weighing each other down with our stares.

"Maybe I am," he said, meaning each word. "Maybe I am crazy for wanting you despite everything. Who knows?" and then he pulled me

closer until my ears were on his chest. "You are the most fucked up person I know, Belinda, but no matter how fucked up you are, you don't scare me. You don't make me want to run away from you." He pulled me closer—if that was even possible. I could feel the heat of his skin against mine. We were naked next to each other and nothing felt more natural than this. "This heart... this fucking heart only goes crazy when you're around. You make me lose my balance, Belinda. You make me lose my mind. You make me forget what's right and wrong. So don't ask me again why it's you I chose because I have no fucking idea, as well."

And then he cupped my face and leveled his face with mine.

"All I know is that I will stop at nothing to have you." And then he dipped his face and placed a kiss on my lips. "Only death can take you away from me... and maybe in after life, I'll still be chasing after you."

The next morning, we pretended that everything's normal. I helped him get logs—but more on I watched him. He was treating me like I was a porcelain doll and he didn't want me to do anything at all. Pakiramdam niya ay dahil buntis ako, wala na akong silbi.

"When are we coming back?" I asked when we were eating.

"When are you needed?"

"Soonest," I replied. I was afraid of what Angela was doing with my business. And I was wondering why I still wasn't hiring anyone who's more capable than her. Because when you hire an assistant, it's supposed to make you feel at ease. Pero sa aming dalawa ni Angela, mas lalo lang akong kinakabahan kapag siya ang pinapagawa ko ng mga trabaho. A dog could do a better job than her.

Suddenly, I missed Sandra again.

"Ikaw? Kailan ka babalik sa France?"

"I told you, where you are, there I am. If you're staying here, then I'm here, as well."

"Pero paano ang trabaho mo? Aren't you needed there?"

"Let's get married."

Nahulog ang hawak kong kutsara. Agad na pinulot iyon ni Avo at inabutan ako ng bagong kutsara. I couldn't speak. I couldn't say anything. He rendered me speechless! Para lang siyang nag-aaya na bumili ng candy sa tindahan sa pagkaka-sabi niya sa akin!

"I don't want our kid to be a bastard. Let's get married before you give birth."

Napa-kurap-kurap ako.

Napa-awang ang labi.

"W-what?"

"Will you marry me?"

"Are you on drugs?"

"I may be a lot of things but I don't do drugs, Belinda."

"But you deal with drugs."

"Yes," he replied. "But it's the choice of the people to take drugs. And I choose not to take drugs. There's always a choice... now, I'm asking you to marry me."

Hindi ko alam kung matatawa ako sa kanya. He's so fucking casual that it hurt.

"You're impossible, Avo," naiiling kong sabi sa kanya.

"Why?"

"Why are you asking me to marry you?"

"Why not? I'm sure you're the one I want to spend the rest of my life with."

"Is it not because we're having a kid together? Because that's not enough reason to ask me to marry you! I told you, ibibigay ko sa 'yo ang anak mo. I gave you my word. You fulfilled your end of the deal so I promise you that I'll fulfill my end."

We had been in this cabin for four days but it felt longer. Akala ko ay marami na akong alam kay Avo pero mas marami pa akong nalalaman tungkol sa kanya. I had learn all kinds of things—both bad and worse.

But none of those made me want to run away from him.

Instead, it made me want to stay and learn more about him.

"When will you fucking get that it's not about the kid? I want to be with you." He was calm but his voice was menacing. His eyes were dark. "You're the one I want, you fucking, twisted, crazy lunatic."

Napa-awang ang labi ko.

"Is this... how you propose?"

He got a pouch from his pocket. It was velvet. It wasn't even a box!

"You're far from normal, Belinda, so I figured you won't like a normal proposal." He pushed the pouch towards me. "Marry me."

Inabot ko iyong velvet pouch at binuksan. There was a ring. It was beautiful.

"It's brandnew. I figured you won't like anything that's from my family," he said as I was looking at the ring. It was breathtakingly beautiful. Hindi ko maiwasan na isuot iyon. I raised my hand and admired the beauty that was the ring. Napa-tingin ako kay Avo. He was fucking smiling. And his smiles always caught me off guard. Avo was never the smiling type. He was more of the frowning and glowering kind of person. Nakaka-panibago na makita siyang naka-ngiti.

"It suits you," he said.

"I know," I replied.

"So, is it a yes?"

"What can I get out of this marriage?"

"Everything."

I arched my brow. "Everything?"

He nodded. "With my parents gone, I own everything. If you marry me, I'll give you everything."

"Paano kung patayin mo ako habang natutulog ako? Mapupunta sa 'yo lahat ng pag-aari ko."

"Jesus, woman. Why do you fucking think like that?"

"I just want to be sure."

I didn't want what my parents and my forefathers worked hard for to

go to him. To an *Ostenhaimer.* Especially when it would forever be known that his parents were the one responsible for my parents' demise.

"Then draw a pre-nup. I don't care about your organization. *Ostenhaimer's* is a headache in itself. I don't want to add to my problems," he casually said like my organization didn't amount to billions of dollars.

I nodded. "Alright. I'll ask my lawyer for a pre-nup. In case of *untimely* and *unnatural* death, all my assets will go to my kid. Not a cent will go to you."

"Why do you always think that I'll kill you?"

I shrugged. "It's always a possibility."

"I could've killed you a long time ago."

"But you can always change your mind."

He sighed. "Fine. And in case of *my* untimely death, you get to have everything," he replied. "Sounds good?"

I nodded. "Sounds good."

I, therefore, conclude that we're never the normal couple. Nothing about us was normal... and I wouldn't change it for anything.

Chapitre Cinquente Quatre

We decided to stay for another day. We basically stayed in bed... Avo was insatiable. Hindi niya ako tinigilan hanggang hindi ako nagmamakaawa na pagpahingahin niya na ako. He drained every bit of energy I had.

Not that I was complaining... being woken up by his lips on my core was something I would never whine about. It was always a welcomed surprise.

"When we return, I'll be the one to run the business." I arched my brow. "I won't steal it from you."

"Mabuti na ang malinaw."

Napa-iling na lang siya. "I don't know if you're like that because you're pregnant or if you're really just a bitch by nature."

Napa-awang ang labi ko. "Gusto mo akong magpakasal sa 'yo pero tinatawag mo akong bitch?" hindi maka-paniwala kong tanong.

"Why? I already accepted that I'm marrying a lunatic so why can't you accept that on most days, you're a bitch?" he asked in a as-a-matter-of-fact tone.

"You deserve every bitchiness I show you, Avo. And you'll experience more of that."

He shrugged. "Alright."

"You still have time to back out."

"Not happening," he replied. "What kind of wedding will we have?"

"Just a simple one because let's face it, we don't have friends."

I couldn't even begin to think about who I'd invite to the wedding. Wala akong kaibigan... at sigurado ako na wala ring kaibigan si Avo. We're both alike, kagaya ng palagi niyang sinasabi. And was Lorenzo even considered as a friend? He's only there when it's entertaining for him. And now that everything's settling, hindi ko alam kung makikita ko pa ulit siya.

And Night... I didn't even have any idea kung nasaan siya.

"Right. So, just the priest and us?"

"Priest? Avo, we killed and murdered people. I don't think inviting a priest will be appropriate."

And I was sure that I was destined to go down there. I wouldn't even question that. Tanggap ko sa sarili ko. I was already past redemption. The best thing I could do was to make sure that my child would not follow the same path as mine. Iyon na lang siguro ang pinaka-magandang magagawa ko sa buhay ko.

"So, what? A judge?"

I nodded. "Better. And then witnesses."

"Anyone in mind?"

I shrugged. "Let's just get random people."

Pinaupo ako ni Avo habang inaayos niya ang mga gamit namin. Again, I was munching on fruits. Avo was making sure that I was always well-fed. Pakiramdam ko ay hindi nawawalan ng pagkain ang mga kamay ko. He was also always feeding me vegetables. Pakiramdam ko ay isa akong hayop dahil puro dahon ang kinakain ko.

"Everything ready?" he asked. I was wearing his white long-sleeved polo because I had no clothes of mine here.

I nodded. "It's not as if I came here ready kaya may dala ako," I said.

"Always the snarky one."

I arched a brow. "Nagrereklamo ka ba?"

He shook his head. "Let's go," he said and then held my hand.

Naglakad kami papunta sa sasakyan niya. Inalalayan niya ako papasok. "Sleep. I'll just wake you when we're home."

I nodded and then closed my eyes. These days, I was always sleepy. Noon, hindi ko naiintindihan pero simula nang malaman ko na buntis ako, I had been easier on myself. I didn't want to cause complication on my kid. I started to eat healthy and to sleep early. I had to adjust everything to accommodate the needs of my kid. Hindi ko alam na ganito pala ang pakiramdam ng magkakaroon na ng anak.

If I had given this kid up, hindi ko alam kung nasaan na ako ngayon. I'd probably forever regret this. The guilt would eat me up alive.

My slumber was disturbed when I heard loud noises. Unti-unti kong idinilat ang mga mata ko. Nagtaka ako nang mapansin ko na wala ako sa sasakyan. Nandito ulit ako sa cabin. Nagsimula akong maglakad-lakad para hanapin si Avo pero hindi ko siya makita.

I looked for him in the bedroom, in the comfort room, in the kitchen pero wala siya. Akmang lalabas ako dahil baka nanguha na naman siya ng kahoy nang mapa-tingin ako sa bintana.

Biglang nanghina ako sa nakita ko.

"Avo, where—"

Nabitin sa ere ang salita ko nang mapansin ko na napapalibutan kami ng mga taong may hawak ng baril. Biglang lumakas ang kabog ng dibdib ko. Agad na hinanap ng mga mata ko si Avo at parang huminto sa pagtibok ang puso ko nang makita ko siyang nasa kalsada at duguan.

I couldn't move.

I didn't know what to do.

He was surrounded by men and he was covered in blood. Mas lalong lumakas ang kaba ko nang makita ko ang ina ni Ella na may hawak na baril sa ulo ni Avo at naka-tutok doon. Gusto kong lumabas. Gusto kong tulungan si Avo pero hindi ako maka-galaw. Tears began to pool.

We were just beginning to build a life together... Bakit ngayon pa ito nangyari?

Napa-tingin sa gawi ko si Avo. Tears continuously fell down. He shook his head, mouthed for me to stay inside.

No.

Hindi pwede.

Hindi ko alam kung ano ang nararamdaman ko. Natatakot ako. Kinakabahan. Hindi ko alam kung ano ang pwedeng mangyari.

At mas lalo akong napa-sigaw nang hampasin siya ng baril sa ulo—dahilan para mawalan siya ng malay. Unti-unting lumapit sa bintana ang ina ni Ella. She looked furious. Kasunod niya sa likod ang ina ni Fuji.

"Get out," she hissed. Tears fell down without a hitch. My eyes were focused on Avo. Habang kinakaladkad ang walang malay na katawan niya palapit sa bintana. His face was a mess. His head covered with blood. I felt anger rose in my throat. Ano'ng karapatan nila na saktan si Avo?! He was not a part of our mess! Ako ang pumatay sa mga anak nila, hindi si Avo!

She tried to shoot the window but it wouldn't budge. Avo said that this was a safe place, na hindi ito pwedeng pasukin ng kahit na sino. Biglang kumirot ang dibdib ko. Dinala niya ako sa loob para maging ligtas ako.

Habang siya...

"I'll kill your boyfriend if you don't get out!" she shouted.

Napa-tingin ako kay Avo. I didn't know what to do. Alam ko na kapag lumabas ako, papatayin niya ako. Papatayin niya kami ng anak ko. Pero si Avo...

"One!" she began to count. I remained still. "Two!" At saka niya itinutok ang baril sa walang malay na si Avo. "I'm waiting, Estrella!"

Nanginginig ang mga kamay ko na nagsimulang buksan ang pintuan.

"I'm sorry," I whispered to my stomach. "I have to save your daddy."

Pagka-bukas na pagka-bukas ko ng pintuan, agad akong nakaramdam ng sakit nang hilahin ni Stella, ina ni Ella, ang buhok ko.

"Finally, you bitch!" she said, pulling my hair. Agad akong napaluhod sa lupa, asking my baby to hold on. Nagpasalamat ako dahil maluwag ang damit ko. Ayokong malaman niya na buntis ako dahil natatakot ako sa maaari niyang gawin.

"Let him go!" I shouted. "Nakuha mo na ako! Pakawalan mo si Avo!"

"You're mine now, bitch! You don't get to call the shots!"

Nagsimula siyang kaladkarin ako. Niyakap ko ang tiyan ko. Gusto ko na lang maiyak sa sakit na nararamdaman ko pero pinaalala ko sa sarili ko na hindi dapat ako maging mahina ngayon.

I needed to be strong now more than ever.

"Pakawalan mo si Avo!" patuloy kong sigaw pero walang nakikinig sa akin. Ipinasok nila ako sa isang sasakyan at saka tinalian ang mga kamay ko at paa. Nilagyan din nila ng busal ang bibig ko.

Ngayon lang ako nakaramdam ng ganitong takot sa buong buhay ko. Ramdam ko na ang kamatayan ko.

"Tie him up, too!" sigaw niya nang ipasok si Avo kasama ko. He was still bleeding badly. I wanted to touch him and apologize for getting him into this mess but I couldn't do anything. I could only watch as he was being tied up like an animal.

I'm sorry, Avo...

And I'm sorry to our child.

Kung hindi lang ako ang naging ina mo, hindi mangyayari 'to.

I have felt scared before... but not as much as I was scared of what was going to happen to us. It was eating me up inside. Natatakot ako... but when Avo opened his eyes, biglang lumakas ang kabog ng dibdib ko. Blood was covering his face. It was all my fault! Ako ang gumawa nito! Nadadamay siya sa galit ng mga kaaway ko sa akin!

He looked at me, as if he was saying goodbye.

"I told you I'll destroy anyone who hurts you."

And then he pulled the trigger.

Agad na bumagsak sa lupa ang isa sa mga lalaking may hawak sa akin. Nagkagulo ang mga tao sa paligid. Hindi ko na naintindihan ang mga

nangyayari. Gusto ko silang patayin nang muli nilang hampasin sa ulo si Avo gamit ang isang kahoy. Those fucking monsters! They would pay for everything they did! 'Wag nilang hayaang mabuhay ako dahil ipaparamdam ko sa kanila lahat ng ginawa nila sa amin!

Pinilit kong maging malakas. I stayed alert. I wanted to remember where we're headed. I just needed to send a message to Johann to save us. Walang bintana ang lugar na pinaglagyan sa amin kaya pilit kong kinakabisado ang bawat pagliko na ginagawa.

I shouldn't die.

Not like this!

Ilang oras kaming nasa daan. I tried to kick the door but I only ended up hurting my leg. Gusto kong gisingin si Avo pero hindi ako maka-lapit sa kanya. He was fucking tied to a post! Na parang alam nila na gagawin ni Avo ang lahat para maka-alis.

I didn't believe in God but I prayed. I prayed that He'd save us. O kahit hindi ako. Kahit si Avo na lang at ang anak namin. Wala silang kasalanan. Ako ang gumawa ng lahat ng ito. Ako ang pumatay kay Ella at Fuji. Ako lang ang dapat magbayad sa kasalanan at hindi sila.

If a life would be taken, it should be mine only.

Ayoko na madamay sila.

"Baba!" sabi sa akin ni Stella nang huminto ang van. Nasa isang warehouse kami. Biglang nanlamig ang buong katawan ko. Bumalik sa akin lahat ng mga ka-demonyohang ginawa ko sa ganitong lugar.

Would I end up like that, as well?

Would I be cut to pieces, too?

Hinatak ako papasok habang si Avo ay walang awang kinaladkad. I was afraid that he'd bleed out and die. Malaki ang sugat sa ulo niya at sigurado ako na marami ng dugo ang nawala sa kanya. If God couldn't save me, kahit si Avo na lang... Alam ko na aalagaan niya ang anak namin. Alam ko na hindi niya siya papabayaan.

"Bantayan niyo 'yan! Kayo ang malilintikan sa akin kapag naka-wala 'yan!" sigaw ni Stella sa mga tauhan niya. Umalis siya at mabilis kong

nilapitan ang walang malay na si Avo. Both my hands and feet were tied. I tried to move without harming my baby.

"Avo..." I called his name. I wanted him to wake up. I *needed* him to wake up. "Avo, please..."

Hindi siya gumigising. Mas lalong bumilis ang pagtulo ng mga luha ko.

"Help him! Mamamatay siya kapag hindi siya nadala sa ospital!" sigaw ko sa kanila pero wala ni isa sa kanila ang gustong tumulong. "Magkano ba ang binayad sa inyo?! Dodoblehin ko! Titriplehin ko! Tulungan niyo lang siya!"

A man looked at me, probably thinking twice about the offer. I grabbed the chance.

"I'll give you ten million—anything!" I begged. "I'm rich! I can make you richer than you can ever imagine!"

"Papatayin tayo ni boss kapag nalaman niyang nakikipag-usap tayo!" sabi ng isa.

"Pero, p're, sampung milyon! Saan tayo makakakuha niyan?! Magkano lang ba ibabayad sa 'tin ni boss dito sa ginagawa natin? At saka buntis misis ko! Makaka-tulong 'yung pera."

I nodded, my face full of tears.

"Just one phone call, please. Let me make a call and I'll transfer the money in your account," I said, my voice desperate. Nagtinginan silang tatlo.

"Ano?" tanong ng isa.

"Paano kapag nalaman ni boss?"

Tinignan ako. "Tig sampu kaming tatlo?"

I nodded. "Yes."

"Wala namang laglagan, 'di ba?"

"Oo," sagot nung isa. "Tingin ka sa labas, p're. Sabihan mo ko 'pag pabalik na si boss." Mabilis niyang nilabas ang cellphone niya. "Ano'ng number?"

I quickly recited the number. And as soon as someone answered, I

quickly said my code. Agad kong naka-usap si Johann.

"Find my location!"

"What—"

"I have no time to talk, Johann! Locate me!"

"I need you to stay in the line longer for me to locate you, Miss Belinda," he said. Bawat segundong lumilipas, mas lumalakas ang kabog ng dibdib ko. Panay ang tanong sa akin ng mga lalaki kung tapos na raw ba akong makipag-usap. "Another minute..."

"Faster!"

"You're somewhere in Cavite, Miss Belinda. We still need a few second to get the exact location."

Kaunti na lang... kaunti na lang nang biglang maputol ang linya.

"Iyong pera namin," sabi nung lalaki.

I was heaving in fear and anger but I managed to transfer the money. It was just money. Kayang-kaya kong palitan iyon. And I didn't want to anger these guys. Baka kung ano ang gawin nila sa akin at kay Avo.

"Tangina, p're. Sampung milyon."

I was looking at Avo.

"Please... can you please help him? Mamamatay siya kapag napabayaan..."

Nagtinginan sila sa isa't-isa.

"Tulungan ba natin?"

"'Di ba magagalit si boss?"

"'Di ba 'yung babae lang naman habol niya? Okay lang naman siguro kung tutulungan natin 'yung lalaki... At saka, p're, sampung milyon! Paubaya na natin 'to."

Tumango iyong dalawa.

"Okay. Kuha lang ako ng gagamitin."

I was still in tears. "Thank you... Thank you..."

Nanatili akong nakaupo habang hinihintay na bumalik iyong lalaki. Pagbalik niya, akma akong magpapasalamat muli nang manlaki ang mga mata ko sa nakita ko.

"N-night?"

"Leave us."

Mabilis na lumabas ang mga lalaki.

"A-ano'ng ginagawa mo rito?"

Mayroong dalang gamot si Night. Lumuhod siya sa tabi ni Avo at nagsimulang gamutin ang sugat nito sa ulo. He wasn't saying anything but he started to treat Avo's head wound.

"Why are you with them, Night?"

I kept on asking questions but none of those were answered.

"Did you plan this all along? Plano mo ba na tulungan sila para kuhanin ako? Para patayin ako?"

He stopped treating his wound. He looked at me.

"You asked for this," he said, his voice low. The way he looked at me, it was not the same. Biglang nag-iba ang tingin niya sa akin. His eyes were cold, arctic even. I couldn't recognize him anymore.

"You did this to me?"

"I told you not to kill Ella and Fuji."

"Did you do this to me?!"

He clenched his jaw. "You killed Laurie!"

Lumalim ang paghinga ko. "Was this your plan all along?! To get close to me?! To pretend that we're okay and then to betray me?!"

Naka-tingin kami sa isa't-isa, walang gustong bumitiw.

"She was innocent! She just wanted to protect me! You should've known that she was lying but you still killed her!"

Mabilis na tumulo ang mga luha ko.

"*You* killed her, Night. *You* were the one she was protecting. Why are you putting all the blame on me?!"

"You were the one who shot her!" he shouted.

"But you were the one who made me pull the trigger!" I shot back.

Umiikot ang ulo ko. Hindi ko maintindihan ang mga nangyayari. Hindi ko kayang intindihin na si Night ang dahilan kung bakit ako nandito. Akala ko...

Bakit nga ba ako nagtiwala?

Hindi pa ba ako natuto?

Ilang beses pa ba akong pagtataksilan bago ako matuto?

"You deserve this," he said. He stood up. "Avo will live."

"Night..." I said, tears flowing down my face. "I'm pregnant."

He looked at me with his cold eyes. "Why do you care? You wanted it gone, in the first place."

Umiling ako. "No... Please, Night. 'Wag mong idamay ang anak ko. Wala siyang kinalaman dito..."

Wala na akong pakielam kung magmakaawa ako. Wala na akong pakielam kung anuman ang sabihin ko. I just wanted to save my baby. I didn't want him to end this way. Ni hindi pa niya nararanasang mabuhay.

Avo and I planned a whole life for him. Hindi kayang tanggapin ng pagkatao ko na hanggang dito na lang.

Hindi pwede.

"Your child is a part of you, Estrella. He's every inch of a devil that you are. He deserves to die. Fucking destroy anyone related to you. You bring harm to anyone who knows you, Estrella. Your kind should be destroyed."

Umiling ako. "No. Night, please, no..." Tumayo na siya. "'Wag mo akong iwanan dito, Night!"

He opened the door.

"Pray to your god, Estrella. Pray for your god to save you."

Nagdasal ako. Paulit-ulit. Na kung hindi man ako, kahit ang anak ko na lang. Na 'wag na silang madamay sa isang bagay na wala naman silang kinalaman.

Nang bumalik na si Stella, bumalik na naman ang lakas ng kabog ng

dibdib ko. Mayroon siyang dala-dalang isang malaking gunting. Napapikit na lang ako sa takot sa maaari niyang gawin sa akin.

"I heard from Night how you killed my daughter," she said, her lips quivering. "How you cut her up and threw pieces of her to the sea." Unti-unti siyang lumapit sa akin. Iniangat niya ang braso ko. "You're a fucking monster."

I closed my eyes as I felt the searing pain. Unti-unti niyang pinuputol ang braso ko.

"I waited for this moment. Hinintay ko hanggang sa magkaroon ako ng pagkakataon na gawin sa 'yo ang lahat ng kababuyan na ginawa mo sa anak ko!"

I could feel the blade going against my bone. Napaiyak ako sa sobrang sakit. Sinubukan niyang putulin ang buong braso ko pero hindi niya magawa dahil sa buto ko. Wala na akong magawa kung hindi ang umiyak na lang at magdasal na dumating na si Johann.

If anyone can hear me, save my child... And Avo... Kahit 'wag na ako...

"What did Ella ever do to you?! Para magawa mo sa kanya iyon?!"

I shouted in pain. Ilang beses niyang sinubukan na putulin ang braso ko pero hindi siya magtagumpay.

"You butchered her like an animal!"

"Tama na!" I shouted and shouted but she didn't stop. Blood flowed from my arm. Kitang-kita ko ang mga laman ko na naka-laylay. Ang dugo na bumubuhos mula sa braso ko. Ang buto ko na ilang beses niyang sinubukan na putulin.

I couldn't bear the pain any longer. I couldn't feel anything but pain anymore. Pakiramdam ko ay manhid na ako sa sobrang sakit.

"Bakit kami titigil?! Tumigil ka ba nang walang awa mong pinutol ang katawan ng anak ko?!" sigaw sa akin ng ina ni Fuji at sinampal ako. Agad kong nalasahan ang dugo sa labi ko.

Isa na lang. Isang subok pa ay ramdam ko na matatanggal na ang kamay ko. I wanted to faint from the pain but I didn't want to give up. Not like this.

"I'm sorry..." I whispered to Avo and my child as I succumbed to the pain. Ipipikit ko na sana ang mga mata ko nang maka-rinig ako ng mga putok ng baril. Mabilis ang mga pangyayari. Agad na pumasok ang mga tauhan ko at mabilis na binaril si Stella at ang mga kasama niya.

Hindi ako maka-galaw.

Hindi ko magalaw ang braso ko dahil sa takot na bigla na lang iyong malaglag. Napapaiyak na lang ako sa sobrang sakit.

Hindi ako maka-gawa ng kahit na ano.

All I could feel was the pain.

"Miss Belinda!" Johann said and then went to me.

"Avo..." I said.

"Get her to the van! She's losing blood!" Johann shouted.

Naramdaman ko na may bumubuhat sa akin nang may marinig na naman akong putok ng baril. Agad na bumagsak si Johann sa harapan ko. Bukas ang mga mata at may dugong umaagos sa gitna ng noo niya.

"It ends tonight, Belinda. No one's leaving until this ends," Night said.

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Epilogue

Nightly Von Klampenberg

It was fucking silent. Everybody wanted to know what happened. But no one wanted to ask the question. But even in the deafening silence, I could still hear those questions. That... how the fuck did Oliver Francius Estrella died. Who the fuck dared? Who the hell dared to mess with the *Estrellas*?

"It's a mess," Lorenzo said. I looked at him, he didn't even seem affected in the slightest. He was quite engaged playing chess.

"Yeah," I replied. He wasn't my favorite person in *AdM* but he's the most tolerable. But I was well aware that he's not one to be trusted. "But why are you smiling?" I asked. His smile was sinister—he had always worn that creepy smile on his face. Like he's always planning something devious.

"Imagine how the Mondragons are doing..."

Right. I was fucking sure that they're already pissing in their pants right now. Oli was their responsibility and they managed to get him killed. I wonder what kind of payment would be required for such an important life taken.

"Do you have an idea who did that?" he asked.

"No," I answered.

"Really?" he asked again, looking into my eyes.

"No," I replied, once again. I stood up. "I have to go somewhere," I excused myself.

"Sure..." he said in a low voice. "Tell me when you know who's the culprit."

Why the fuck was he talking like I had an idea about who did it?

The whole school premise felt cold. The fear was very palpable that I could almost feel it touching my skin. Maybe because this was a real threat. If anyone managed to kill a fucking Estrella, then this meant real danger. Because in this world we're living in, the Estrellas were at the top. And if they could mess with them, they could surely mess with everyone else.

Since the whole school was in a lockdown, I couldn't go to one of the easiest exits. It was one of the exists that many people were well aware of. I went to the one at the back of the auditorium. This one was the farthest so the Dieux didn't really favor using it.

Memento Mori

I exited and got my gun. I really didn't feel comfortable walking around without a gun. Everyone's full of shit and I didn't know when anyone would want to blow my head out.

Upon reaching my own place, I called my mother. Surely, she knew what the fuck was happening.

"Where are you?" I asked.

"Working."

"Busy?"

"Very," she replied. She didn't sound tired, though. In fact, she sound rather pleased. She's really messed up... like me.

"How are things there?"

"They already got the youngest of the Mondragons," she said. Oh. They got Alicia. What a pity. I liked her.

"What about the one who killed Oli? Do they have leads?"

Maybe I was just a really bored person but the life of the Estrellas had

always been fascinating to me. They're fucked in the heads that sometimes, I wonder if that's the family I should've been born to.

"No."

"You don't have a lead?" I asked, unable to believe what she just said. If anything, my mother was good at finding people. She's really good at what she's doing that's why the Estrellas trusted her with their organization. Though if they knew that she's a part of the Klampenbergs, I wondered if they'd still be very accommodating...

She fell silent for a minute.

Fuck.

I was fucking right.

"They'll kill you," I told her. I knew it. Things just didn't add up quite well! I knew Oli and Avo were leaving—but only because I overheard them talking. They said they're going to meet someone. And it was fucking idiotic of me to mention it to my mother!

"They won't know," she said. "I have people everywhere, Night. I asked your little girlfriend—Laurie, is that her name? I asked her to close the passage so that I can proceed to my plans."

What the fuck?!

"She's not my girlfriend!"

Why the fuck was she including Laurie in her games?!

"She's already a part of this, Night. So, if you want to keep her alive... do as I say. Shut up."

"Why did you do it?!" I hissed. She's still my mother even if she messed with things more than fix them. And she's getting in the middle of this war! And there's nothing she could ever do than to fix it!

"They can't always be at the top, Night," she said.

"And what? Have them kill each other?!"

"Yes, preferably," she said. "Don't get yourself in the middle of this, you hear me?"

"You're not even a part of the Klampenbergs anymore. Why are you doing this?"

"Because you're still my son, Nighly. And I'll do everything to get you to the top of it."

"You're hiding here again."

I stared at her and fought the urge to tell her to fuck off. Had I known that she'd attach herself to me like a leech, I wouldn't have fucked her in the first place. Now, I couldn't go anywhere in the campus without her acting like a fucking shadow. And now, she's also in danger. Fuck it.

"Not now, Laurie. I'm tired."

But instead of listening to me, she just sat beside me. "Fucked someone all night?"

"Yes. So, will you please get out of my sight?"

She shook her head. "If I could, I would've done that a long time ago," she said and then crossed her legs. "What are you thinking?"

"Nothing that concerns you."

My parents were pressuring me to graduate faster... because they wanted me to lead the organization for them. Bullshit. If they really wanted someone good to lead, they shouldn't have renounced my *real* mother from the family.

Was it my mother's fault that she got pregnant with a nobody?

Fucking rules in this fucking world I live in.

Because I didn't want to give them the satisfaction of getting what they wanted, I delayed graduating. *AdM* wasn't so bad... here, I ruled. Here, my words were law.

And here, I was far from the grasp of my parents.

"Night, you're called to the admin," Lorenzo said.

I went to the admin and was surprised to see my parents there. Their foreheads were creased and that told me that I did something *again* that they considered displeasing and unbecoming.

"Your father and I—"

"Please. You're not my mother; you're my grandmother," I corrected her.

"Nightly!"

I sighed and then sat down. I had an inkling that this would be a rather long night.

"As I was saying, your father and I heard that you're sleeping with practically everyone here—"

"Unbelievable," I muttered. "Are you now concerned about my sex life?"

My grandma's lips parted. "Nightly!"

"So what if I'm sleeping around?"

"We just don't want you to impregnate someone—"

"What? Unworthy? Like my dad?"

My grandma's about to speak again when my grandpa interrupted.

"One more wrong response and you'll get what you're looking for, Nightly."

And that rendered me silent. I had always feared my grandfather. His words were law. If he says something, one way or another, he would make it happen. When he said that my father would regret sleeping with my mother, he made true with his promise. He tortured my dad until he begged to be killed. I watched as he butchered my father like a pig. I watched as he cut his limbs, his joints. I watched as his flesh filled the filthy ground.

I watched as animals feed on him.

And they wondered why I turned out like this.

"Promise me you won't sleep around, Nightly..." my grandma asked of me.

I sighed. "Fine."

Since I didn't want any more trouble from my grandparents, I tried to follow what they asked of me. I also didn't want them showing up unannounced. The very reason why I stayed in this fucking place was

to get away from them. And if they'd show up every time, then there's no reason why I should be here anymore.

"Lunch?"

Laurie beamed. "Really?"

I nodded. I was a *Dieux* so my options for lunch buddy was pretty limited. I didn't want to eat with Avo and Oli—they're both too good and they made me feel like I was a demon when I was with them. Lorenzo's a fucking weirdo. Fuji just kept on getting into my nerves for some reasons. And eating with Ella wasn't even a part of my options.

Laurie and I ate lunch. She kept on telling me these nonsense stories. I pretended that I was listening but truth was, I was thinking if I'd fuck her again. I made a self-rule never to fuck someone twice because why would I? There were plenty of willing pussies to fuck. Everyone wanted a piece of me because I was a *Dieux.* As if sleeping with me would give them power.

Bitches.

But Laurie was different. For some reasons, she's different. She didn't care about my status. I felt like she just genuinely wanted to annoy the shit out of me by following me around.

"Sleep with me," I asked. Might as well make something out of her. If she'd constantly follow me, better make a use for her. And she's hot. Laurie's annoying but I wasn't blind. Those legs and her fucking lips.

A fucking hard on.

Laurie blinked. "Okay."

I didn't know how it happened but apparently, Laurie's my girlfriend. I didn't make an effort to correct the people around me because it didn't matter. All I cared about was that I heeded my parents' request not to fuck around. I was fucking only one girl.

"Good girl," I said as I watch Laurie suck my dick. I just

finished my breakfast and here she was, draining all my energy early in the morning. I held her hair away from her face because it turned me on watching her put my whole dick inside her mouth. She never disappointed me. Not everyone could take all of me but Laurie didn't care even if she gag. She always took all of me. And it always felt so fucking good.

I combed her hair as she sucked me dry.

"Where are you going?" she asked as I began to button my pants.

"Class," I replied.

"Will I see you at lunch?"

I shrugged. "Maybe." I went near her and wiped the trace of my cum on the side of her lips. She's so fucking hot.

When I arrived, the class wasn't starting. Shit. I should've fucked Laurie against the wall instead of waiting here and doing nothing! I tried to busy myself while waiting. Avo was sitting beside me, acting weird and everything. Who did he think he was making a fool of? I knew he was a different person. Sure, the face was the same but he's a completely different person. I just didn't want to tell him that yet because I was hoping that I could use this knowledge as a leverage someday.

When the professor arrived, someone was tailing behind.

"Mr. Ostenhaimer and Mr. Klampenberg, could this lady sit between the two of you?"

And surprisingly, Avo nodded. And that caught my curiousity.

"Here's your schedule for the whole term. It's already in your iPad. Should you have any more question, you may approach me anytime," the prof explained. I was watching every reaction of this girl named *Boe*. She looked clueless.

Interesting.

Days passed and I was intrigued more than ever. Avo was suprisingly protective of the new girl. He even ditched Ella for her—knowing the fact that Ella would probably make his life a living hell.

"What are you doing?" I asked Fuji as I stared at him locking the freezer.

"Fuck off, Klampenberg," he said, walking pass me.

"Avo will kill you," I reminded him. Avo made it clear that his little girlfriend's not to be messed with. Didn't he know that with what he's doing, he's just feeding fuel to my already burning curiosity?

"Let him."

I let him leave. It's his life, anyway. I decided to stay for a while before deciding to open the door of the freezer and there she was. The newest little princess.

"What happened?" Lorenzo asked as we stared at the sleeping figure of Avo's little girlfriend.

"Froze to death," I replied.

"Ah... Let's tell Avo," Lorenzo said.

"Are you crazy? No! Hindi pwede!" Fuji was quick to argue. I smirked. Duwag. He's so brave to kill Avo's newest toy and now, he's afraid of the repercussions?"

"Avo will kill us," I said, reminding them of some of the possibilities. It wasn't a secret that Avo's family was to be feared. "Ikaw, Lorenzo, what do you think?" I asked. Lorenzo might be weird but his opinion was something I would like to consider. He's wise... for some reasons.

"Fuji is right. Avo will definitely have Ella's head once na malaman niya ang nangyari kay Boe. It doesn't matter if she's guilty or not—we all know how Avo will react whenever Boe's involved," he explained. "But Night is also right. Kapag naman nalaman ni Avo na hindi natin sinabi, he'll kill us."

Fuji cut him off. "But nothing happened to her, right? Nakita naman siya ni Night and she's recovering. Can we just let this one pass? Ella's our friend."

I wanted to vomit at what he said. Ella's not my friend. She's fucking annoying and loud. I was about to comment on Ella when I noticed that Boe opened her eyes.

"How are you feeling?" I asked her.

"Where am I?" she asked. "Nasa hospital ba ako?" I nodded. "Ano ang nangyari?"

I looked at Fuji and he was pale as a ghost. Stupid. If you couldn't deal with the aftermath, then don't even dare to start something you can't finish.

"What can you remember?" I asked her for the benefit of Fuji. Boe began to tell us everything that happened and she didn't remember anything substantial. I sensed relief from Fuji. Coward.

"I already checked the CCTV at wala namang nakita na kakaiba," Lorenzo said. "Maybe the perpetuator knows all the blind spots. Walang nakita kahit likod man lang."

Good liar. He didn't even check the CCTVs. Maybe he knew, too, that Fuji's the one responsible. After all, he's too fucking obvious with the way he's sweating.

Later on, Fuji walked out on us. Fucking pussy. I faced Boe, instead. "Don't mind him," I told her. "Are you feeling alright?"

She nodded and I felt her relaxing around me. Good. I needed her to be relaxed around me so that she could trust me.

"Si Avo?" she asked.

"He's out," I replied. "Family matters."

"Palagi ba talaga siyang umaalis?"

I nodded. "You're aware about his family, right?" She nodded, but it looked like she wasn't aware about *everything*. "Outside the walls of this academy, maraming nangyayaring gulo sa mga Mafia. The past few years have been the toughest. And being that Avo's family is at the top, his family's in constant danger. Just yesterday, his older sister got kidnapped. But she's already been found. Avo's out—making sure that whoever did that will get his own taste of hell."

I just narrated Avo's version of the truth. I knew it wasn't true, anyway, but it was fun pretending not to know anything.

When I mentioned the possibility of *death* and *torture*, her face paled.

"Don't fear him. He'll never hurt you," I assured her. Whatever Avo's plans were with her, it's none of my business... hanggang hindi ko nalalaman kung sino siya.

But even before we could finish talking, she fainted again. Fucking Fuji. Hindi talaga siya titigil hanggang hindi namamatay si Boe.

"Where are you going?" Laurie asked. She was naked in my bed, all sweaty from our activity.

"Out," I said, wearing my pants.

"When are you coming back?"

"Soon."

I let her stay in my bed. There's nothing in my room, anyway. Though I was living with fellow *Dieux* myself, I didn't trust them. It's stupid to trust them, anyway. They're all cunning like I was. Even that retard Lorenzo was cunning himself.

No one here's to be trusted.

I immediately wrote the secret phrase and the passage automatically opened. I went out and rode in the car that I asked to be brought here. Though I hated my hypocrite family, I couldn't deny that I enjoyed the perks.

"Why are you here?!" mom hissed.

"I missed you, too, mom," I replied sarcastically.

"Nightly!"

I sat and raised my feet. "Water," I ordered the maid.

"Nightly!"

"Geez, mom, chill! You're becoming more like grandma!" I kidded.

"Why are you here?"

"I need information," I told her. She's the best in finding information about someone. I still thought it was a big mistake when my grandparents kicked her out of the family. She's efficient. After all, she was raised to run our empire. Now, she was nothing but an assistant to the *Estrellas*. Irony of life.

"About whom?"

"Boe Estrella," I said. "I thought she's an Estrella but then, I remembered that Oli's the only son." My forehead creased when I noticed the change in her expression. "Why? Do you know her?" I asked.

"No."

"Bullshit. Who is she?"

But I didn't need any more confirmation. Boe's a fucking Estrella.

When I returned to the school, I kept her close to me. I even annoyed her just to make her relax and open up to me. And it fucking worked. She was slowly easing around me. But not enough for her to open up. Konti pa.

"Laurie's family was massacred."

I didn't want to talk about this. I fucking hated my mom for doing this. I knew she did this to remind me not to mess my life. She just didn't want me to end up like her. For everything to be taken away from me if I impregnated someone my family didn't approve of.

But for Boe to trust me, I needed to tell her things I didn't even want to speak about.

"She lost her *Deuxième* status that's why she's a *Quatrième* now," I said.

"Oh, my god. Tapos iniiwasan mo pa siya? Night naman!"

"What?" I asked, exasperated. "What do you want me to do?"

"Talk to her, be there for her! She needs you!"

I put down my utensils and then looked at her. She was full of hope—what a joke. There was no hope. In this world we lived in, hope was a concept only stupid

believe in.

"You know what she needs? She needs to learn how to fend for herself. Now that her family's gone, she's alone. She needs to learn how to fight and she won't
do that if she's around me all the time."

"But you're her boyfriend..." she argued like a little girl desperate for a happily ever after.

"I'm there for her. But I won't always be there."

There was a hint of disappointment in her eyes. But I should do this. I hated how her mind worked.

"If you think that every guy is like Avo, you're mistaken. Not every guy is willing to die for a girl. Not me. At least not for her."

I tried to get away from Boe for the mean time. She's beginning to annoy me. I focused on shooting to get her off of my mind. Or maybe I was frustrated because it had been long since I got laid?

I didn't know anything anymore. My mind's in a state of frenzy.

While walking mindlessly, I heard my name being called. My feet dragged me and then saw Laurie and Boe on the ground. I clenched my fist.

"Who did this?" I asked.

"We're not doing anything wrong. We're in the same level! We're all *Deuxième*!"

Fucking bitches. Why did they keep on annoying me?

"Ah, I see," I replied and then began to get my gun from my backpocket. "So you're saying that if I kill you, it won't be wrong since I'm above you?"

Their faces paled.

"B-bakit mo 'yun gagawin? Laurie's not your girlfriend anymore!"

And then silence.

"I know," I replied and then cocked the gun. "But you don't mess with the people close to me."

And then I watched as they fell on the ground.

"Haven't you done enough damage?!"

My mother shook her head. "I asked her to stay away from you."

"And now, you want her to have her friend raped?! Does Boe even know about this?!"

She looked at me sharply. "You won't meddle with this, Nightly. This is a business that you shouldn't meddle with."

"Then take Laurie out of this!"

She pursed her lips. "It's already done. There's nothing you can do."

I grunted in frustration. When I accidentally saw Laurie in the secret passage, I knew something was definitely wrong. Laurie knew of the passage because I told her about it but she never used it. And when I saw her there, I knew something was going on.

And I was fucking right. My mother wouldn't just let her out of the hook! After murdering Laurie's entire family, she wanted to use her against Boe!

I rushed back to the school to stop Laurie from doing something that she'd regret.

"No," she said upon seeing me.

"She'll kill you!" I reminded her.

"Then I'll die."

"Why are you doing this?!"

She looked at me and then smiled. "She told me she'll let us be together if I follow everything she said... I love you, Night."

I clenched my jaw as I looked at her.

"You're crazy."

"Maybe I am... but I'm in love with you and there's nothing I wouldn't do for you."

And then we sat together as we listened to Boe's cry for help.

It was hard to act different when you're completely aware that everything's different. Boe went missing for a few days and I knew about it. I pretended not to know everything. I watched Avo as he grew worried of his little girlfriend. And I'm worried for Laurie. Because I knew that one way or another, Boe would learn about what she did.

And when she returned, she was different. She was aloof. She was calculating. She was completely different from the person she used to be.

Or maybe this was the real her? I didn't know.

"How do I stop this?" I asked my mom. She was playing the game and only her could stop this madness. "What is it that you want?"

"I want this to be gone..." she said, looking at me. She was hungry for power, I always knew that about her.

"Then destroy it!" I roared. She was controlling everything. She could do it! Why was she meddling with lives of people?!

"I can't," she said through gritted teeth. "This is not something you just destroy, Nightly. This is bigger than us..." she said and then cupped my face. "If you want this to stop, you have
to destroy everyone. Only then this will come to an end."

I couldn't understand what she was saying. All I knew was that she wanted everything to unravel. And so I began to destroy everything. I used their weakness against each other. I used Avo's feelings for Boe. I used Boe's unknowing of the truth. I used Fuji' weakness—Ella.

I just wanted this to fucking end.

"Don't, Night. Boe will kill you! She'll kill you if she learned that you have something to do with what happened—"

"Never speak of it," I warned her.

"Night... I'm worried."

"Don't be," I replied.

"I don't care if she'll kill me for what I did—"

I eyed her. "There's nothing you did, Laurie. Forget what happened that night. It's all my fault."

She shook her head. "No. That's my doing! I won't let you take the fall for me! I won't let anything happen to you!"

"Stay out of it," I warned her.

"This is dangerous…" Laurie said, tears brimming.

I slowly detached her fingers away from my arm. "It's not," I said. "If you keep quiet and stay out of it."

My plan began to happen. Boe slowly learned about Ayo and Oli... and I didn't want to be the one to tell her everything. I was just feeding her information, pushing her in the right direction.

But my plan was sped up when she killed Cathy and Ella.

"You shouldn't have killed Ella," I said as I helped her cut them up. It wasn't time yet... I still needed time to fix everything but it's already here. I could feel my sweat dripping as I tore Ella's arm from her joints. But I couldn't deny the satisfaction of cutting Ella up. She had always been annoying to me. For once, she's silent.

And I didn't care about Cathy. She was a stupid pawn. And it's better that she's dead. She knew too much.

It took time before we managed to cut everything up. I was reminded of how my grandpa cut up my dad. I remembered every movement of the knife. I remembered how my grandpa dismembered my dad. I mimicked every movement and tore Ella and Cathy apart.

When we went outside, I took a quick minute and called Lorenzo.

"Close the passage."

"Why?"

"You'll be entertained," I told him. He's a bored person. He just needed entertainment and I'd provide it to him.

"Alright," he agreed.

I had to act like I was surprised that the passage was closed. I forced Boe to come back inside, risking Fuji seeing her. That's what I wanted to happen. For Fuji to know that his beloved Ella's dead.

And I was pretty sure that Boe's the only one he'd suspect because I'd be fucking away when things unfold.

"I did it."

My plans were ruined when Laurie claimed that it was her who was responsible for everything that happened.

No...

Fuck, Laurie! What were you doing?!

"Before you came, everything was good. Night's with me and Ella's happy with Avo. Everything was perfect... until you ruined it." Her lips were quivering. She was lying. This can't be the truth. "It was fine with me because you're with Avo... But you caught Night's attention. He's in love with you... and I hate it. But what can I do? You're an Estrella... and I'm no one. So I planned everything. I waited. When I became the slave of Avo, I was able to work with Cathy... and that was when I learned that she's in love with Fuji. But Ella had been a real bitch to her. She's the one who ordered the death of Cathy's family when she saw that Fuji was getting close to Cathy."

I couldn't understand what she was saying.

"Shut up."

Why couldn't she just shut up?! She wasn't a part of this!

"And then when news about you breaking up with Avo went out, I knew you were going to go out to think. Because that's who you are. That's what you do... So I used Ella's name to convince Jude to do that to you. You remember that night, Boe?" Laurie asked. "I was at the other side... listening to your cries... I heard every whimper... I heard you say stop, but I didn't listen...
because you deserved everything..."

Boe's hands were clenched. She was mad. And she shouldn't be mad.

"Shut up, Laurie!"

But she wouldn't stop speaking. Everything was a mess. Everyone was shouting. All I cared about was Laurie. She'd die if she stayed here for another second. Boe's a ticking bomb. And she's fuming mad.

And then there she was. She began to shoot Fuji until he's on the ground, bleeding.

And then she was looking at me, her eyes dead.

"Boe, no..." I uttered her name.

"Did you lie to me, too?" she pointed the gun at my face.

But even before I could say anything, Laurie cut in. Fucking shit! Why wouldn't she just shut up?! "He didn't do anything!" she shouted. "I did it! I did everything!"

"Shut your mouth, Laurie!" I roared.

"No! I did it!" Laurie continued. "You heard me! I planned it all! I asked them to rape you!"

Fuck!

Slowly, she walked towards Avo and tried to get the gun from him.

"No," Avo said. "She's your friend. Don't do this, Belinda. You'll regret this."

"Give me the gun," she said, her voice low.

My heart was beating fast. Fuck. No.

"I will kill your brother if you don't give me your gun," she said. She pointed the gun at Laurie.

"No..." I said, fervently shaking my head. "Estrella, don't do this!"

But she didn't listen to me. She removed the safety.

"The price of betrayal..." she said and then began to shoot Laurie until she was satisfied.

My system felt numb. I couldn't feel anything as I stared at her lifeless body. Everything happened in a haze. Lorenzo arrived and took Boe away. I stayed and looked at Laurie's lifeless body.

"You never fucking listen to me," I whispered as I stared at her pale face. My hand went to her face and closed her eyes. "You shouldn't have loved me."

I tried to get over Laurie's death. But every time I would close my eyes, pictures and memories of her would flood my mind. She was everywhere—as if begging me not to forget her.

I hid from everyone. I hid from my mom. I hid from my family. I just wanted peace. I just wanted to think. But it was impossible with Lorenzo looking for me.

"I have a proposition," he said.

"What?" I asked. He wouldn't leave until I humor him. I knew him.

"Let's play again."

I clenched my jaw. "I'm done playing your games," I dismissed him.

"Estrella killed your mother."

Natigilan ako. I felt my blood drain from my system. My hands began to shake.

"You didn't know, do you?" he asked, amused.

"W-what?"

"She killed Sandra. She's pretty mad at everyone right now," he said, smiling. "Now, are you willing to listen to me?"

I sat there and listened. I couldn't fucking believe what I heard. My head couldn't process everything. My mom was dead.

Boe killed her, *too.*

Did she plan on killing everyone in my life?!

"You'll come back and pretend to be her friend... and then we'll lure Avo out," Lorenzo explained.

"What?"

"Estrella's pretty vulnerable right now, Night. She has no one."

"She'll never trust me."

"She has *no one,* Night. Trust me when I say that she's desperate to have anyone in her life."

And he was right. Boe only pretended to be cold but deep inside, she's still the same Boe I knew. She kept on pretending to be strong but she's weak. She couldn't even kill Ayo when he's already ready to be killed.

I stayed with her and tried to get her trust. I did her work—it reminded me
of my mom. And I just hated her more every time she would send me out to do something. She never worked for anything in her life but she felt entitled to take revenge.

She fucking disgusted me.

She's a hypocrite no matter what she did or will do.

And when I learned that she's pregnant, I saw an opportunity to make Avo come home. I just wanted to end it all.

"Did you know?" she asked me when she learned about the baby.

"Yes," I replied. There was no use to lying.

"Since when?"

"About 3 weeks."

Her jaw clenched. "You knew for 3 weeks and you didn't even bother to tell me?"

"For what? For you to think of ways to kill the baby?"

"What do you know?! This is my life!" she shouted at me.

"Calm down," I said.

"I won't fucking calm down!" she shouted.

"It'll be bad for the baby."

"There will be no baby! I don't want a part of him inside me! Get me Dr. Vargas and make her remove this baby!"

She was hysterical. I didn't tell her about the baby because I knew she'd plan to abort it. Belinda's a devil and she wouldn't care to take another life. And aborting the baby would be too easy on her. I wanted her to be attached to the baby... because until then, the pain of losing the baby would be unbearable.

She always said that everyone hurt her. I would make sure that she'd experience what real pain feels like.

When I finally convinced her to use the baby, the plan began to unfold. She finally killed Ayo and his parents. At ngayong babalik na si Avo, simula na ng mga plano ko.

I hacked into the system before leaving her house. I studied every inch of it while I was there. And I paid someone to report every movement in the house. I knew Boe would give in... Because as much as she denied it, she's in love with Avo. She just
liked me fucking her but in her heart, it's Avo.

And when Boe and Avo left the house unguarded, I gave a tip to Ella and Fuji's family. Things escalated quickly. They were taken to a warehouse and I saw
Avo bleeding out. It was a scene to see Belinda crying and helpless.

"Pray to your god, Belinda. Pray for your god to save you."

I stood outside and watched as Stella cut her arms. I rejoiced at the sight of her flesh being torn away from her bones. I wanted to do it myself but Stella wanted to do it. I wondered what she'd do once she learned that Belinda's pregnant...

I wondered how creative she would get...

But even before Belinda's arm got torn, I heard gunfires. I quickly hid. Belinda's men dominated the place. They began to kill one another. I stayed in hiding until it was safe for me to come outside.

"Avo..." Belinda trailed. She was looking at Avo who was almost pale because of the bloodloss. I quickly shot Johann in the head.

"It ends tonight, Belinda. No one's leaving until this ends," I said.

We stared at one another. "Shoot me," she said, tears streaming down her deceptive face. "Tapusin mo na 'to, Night. Pagod na pagod na ako."

I stared at her crying face. How long had I been deceived by that? How long did I almost go against my words because I thought she could change?

How long would I fucking continue to be her fucking toy?

"That will be too easy," I said and then pointed my gun at Avo. The guy she chose. The guy she chose after I fucking promised her everything, after I tried to forgive her for killing everyone I loved.

For killing Laurie.

For killing my mother.

She fucking deserved everything she got.

"You love him, do you?" I asked her.

Fear dominated her face.

"No..." she said, shaking her head. "No, Night... Don't do this."

I began to shoot Avo.

I shot his leg. "This one's for Laurie." And then his other leg. "This one's for my mom." I shot his arm. "This one's for—"

I was about to end Avo whe I felt a stinging pain in my arm. Agad kong nabitawan ang hawak kong baril. I fell on the ground.

And then I turned...

"Why?" I asked, feeling betrayed. Hindi ako makapaniwala. Why did everyone around me keep on betraying me?!

Lorenzo smiled. "It's entertaining... but it's time to stop," he said and then smiled at Belinda. He handed her the gun. "Kill him," he said.

"No," Belinda said. "I'm tired of killing!"

"It won't stop until he's alive, Estrella. Everything that happened to you, Night made it happen. He's the one you should be killing if you want this to end."

Belinda held the gun using her free hand. I was delighted to see her left arm almost severed. I knew she'd kill me... but she'd always remember me whenever she looked at her arm.

She pointed the gun at my head.

"I trusted you..."

I smirked at her, the pain in my arm was disarming. "You've always been stupid in choosing the people you trust."

"I thought you were my friend."

I shook my head. "I don't have a friend."

She smiled. "Goodbye, Night."

I closed my eyes as I felt death embrace me.

Finally... *peace.*

Le Contrecoup

"No," I firmly said.

"But mom!"

I stared at Ali, our son. "No," I repeated. "If you manage to get your pet fish killed, what makes you think that I'll trust you with a pet dog?"

He pouted but it was of no use. I was immuned to that. "I'll talk to Dad."

"Go on," I challenged him. "You know what he'll say."

He stomped on his feet. "*Go ask your mom,*" he mimicked. "It's so unfair!" he said and then walked out.

It had been five years. I never thought we've come this far. Avo and I sold everything. We didn't want to continue the bloodshed. Him surviving after all the blood he lost was a miracle. Hindi ko akalain na mabubuhay pa siya pagkatapos ng lahat ng nangyari. I prayed. I prayed so hard that we'd all survive. And I promised God that I'd do anything if only He'd let us live.

And we all lived.

Himala na nagawa naming makaalis bago dumating ang mga pulis. Namatay lahat ng naiwan. Wala na ang mga humahabol sa amin. Everyone was dead... no one was left to take revenge on anyone. Lorenzo helped us start anew. He helped us sold everything and when he did, I

donated almost everything to charity. I knew it wasn't enough for everything I've done but it was a start... I only left enough for Avo and I to start anew. We went to a far place and began a whole new life. Hinintay ko muna na magising siya mula sa matagal niyang tulog. I was afraid that he'd never wake up... I was afraid that Ali wouldn't see his father.

But I held on. Araw-araw ay kinakausap ko si Avo, hindi ako sumuko
hanggang sa isang araw ay magising siya. And now, it had been five years...

"I told you we'll be together," he said, holding my hand.

"Right," I replied. "Ali's growing to be more like you," I said as we both watch Ali as he threw his toys away. Ito ang dahilan kung bakit wala siyang masyadong kaibigan dito sa New Zealand. He's too much of a brat. Lahat na lang ay inaaway niya.

He raised a brow. "I'm not a brat."

I eyed him. "Avo, I'm not a brat."

"Then why do you make me wash the dishes every time?"

I raised my arm. "Because this hurt when it gets wet."

It was a miracle that my arm survived. Akala ko talaga ay mapuputulan na ako ng kamay dahil sa ginawa ni Stella. But God was good... Hindi niya kami pinabayaan. I still had my arm with me and I was always grateful.

He smirked. "But when we shower together, I don't hear any complains."

My face immediately reddened. "Asshole."

He reached for my knuckle and kissed it. "Do you think God has already forgiven us?" he asked.

I shrugged. "I don't know. Why?"

He reached for his pocket and then showed me a box. Tears began to brim in my eyes. My lips quivered in happiness. Avo smiled at me.

"Because this time, I want to get married in a church."

Vita et obitus Hathumodae primae abbatissae Gandershaimensis

A translation

Thou hast come safe to port,
I still at sea,
The light is on thy head,
darkness in me.
Pluck thou in heaven's field
violet and rose,
while I strew flowers that will thy vigil keep
where thou dost sleep,
love, in thy last repose.

-Agius

Glossary

Academia de Mondragon

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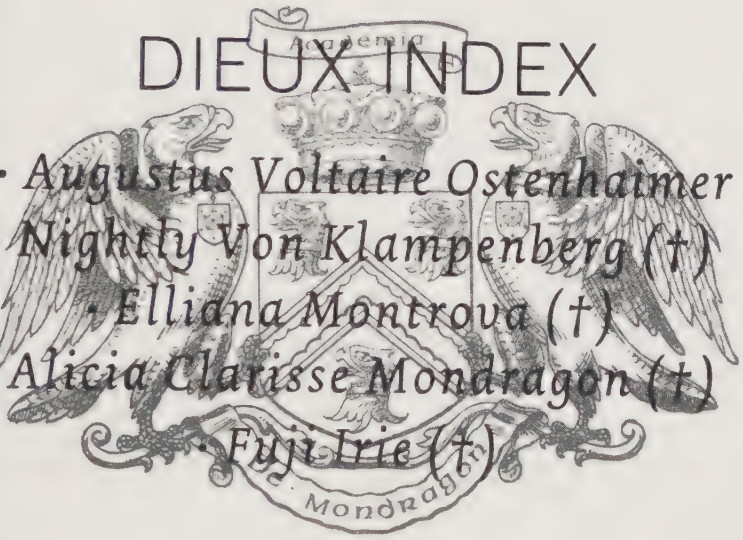

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- *Laurie Smith (reinstituted) (†)*
- *Jude Nathaniel Andrada (†)*
- *Janice Andrada (†)*
- *Jenicka Andrada (†)*

Academia de Mondragon

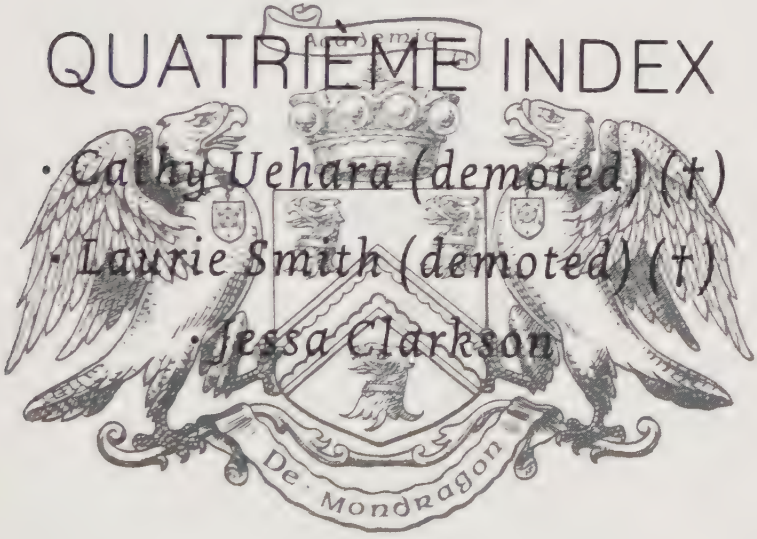
TROISIÈME INDEX

Claire Valderrama

Academia de Mondragon

QUATRIÈME INDEX

- *Cathy Uehara (demoted) (†)*
- *Laurie Smith (demoted) (†)*
- *Jessa Clarkson*



Mafia Organizations

Estrella

IN OMNIA PARATUS
READY FOR ANYTHING.

Del Rio

DICTUM FACTUM
WHAT IS SAID IS DONE.

Ostenhaimer

ODERINT DUM METUANT
LET THEM HATE
SO LONG AS THEY FEAR.

Klampenberg

AUT NECA AUT NECARE
EITHER KILL OR BE KILLED.

Montrova

MORIOR INVICTUS
DEATH BEFORE DEFEAT.

Irie

HOC EST BELLUM
THIS IS WAR.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

ARIES A JANE DOMINGO graduated from University of the Philippines - Diliman with a degree in Communication Arts.
One day, she aspires to be a lawyer,
the next day, she wants to travel the world alone.
She wants to do all these random stuff but always too tired to do so.
She is not the people kind of person. She is awkward. She is shy.
She will probably remain inside the confines of her bubble and be clueless
but there is one thing she is sure of:
her love of writing.

beeyotch

@beeyotchwp

@aryesaaaaa

Eydee Palma

Eydee's Stories

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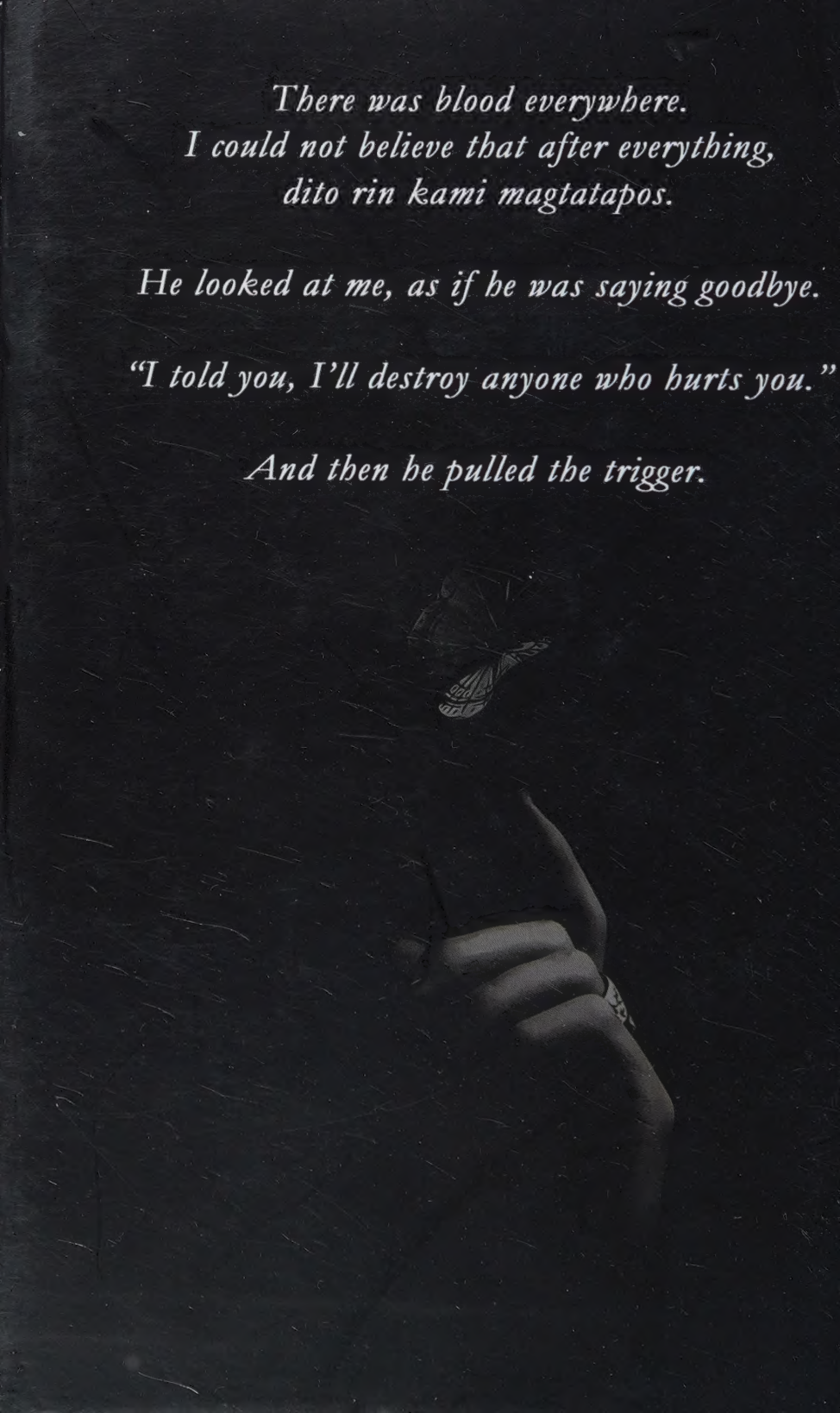
Jacket and Book Cover Design & Layout by Lynne Agapito

There was blood everywhere.
I could not believe that after everything,
dito rin kami magtatapos.

He looked at me, as if he was saying goodbye.

"I told you, I'll destroy anyone who hurts you."

And then he pulled the trigger.